

# interzone

AUGUST 2001

NUMBER 170

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## 'ESPIRITU SANTO' A LORD SOHO STORY BY RICHARD CALDER

PLUS STORIES BY  
THOMAS M. DISCH  
STEPHEN DEDMAN  
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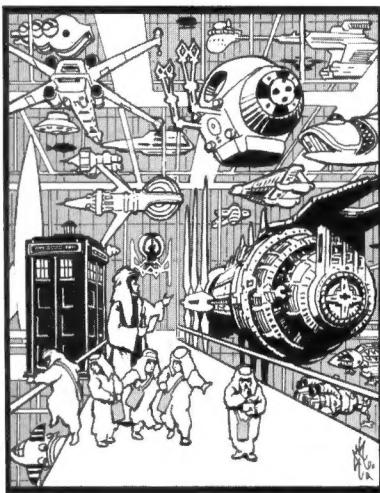
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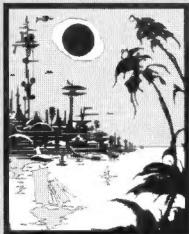
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## COMING NEXT MONTH

In hand are new stories by Gregory Benford, Eric Brown, Thomas M. Disch, Alexander Glass, Leigh Kennedy, Garry Kilworth, Ruaridh Pringle, Lisa Tuttle, Zoran Zivkovic and many others. A fine selection of those will appear in the September issue of *Interzone* — along with all our usual features and reviews.



Vignettes by SMS

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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

AUGUST 2001

Number 170

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**Cover by Dominic Harman for "Espiritu Santo."**

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## INTERFACE

Earlier this year we asked *Interzone* readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) stories published in the magazine during the

year 2000 – that is, in issue numbers 151 to 162 inclusive. Forty-two ballots were received by the 31st May deadline. Thanks to everyone who participated (and a few of you did so in enormous detail). As usual, we have subtracted all negative votes from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. The total number of stories published last year was 62 – but to save space, and to avoid undue embarrassment for those authors who came towards the bottom of the heap, we list here only the top 40 out of the 62 stories.

### Story Poll Results, 2000

1)	<i>Barrington Bayley: The Worms of Hess</i>	18
2)	<i>Liz Williams: Adventures in the Ghost Trade</i>	16
3)	<i>Zoran Zivkovic: The Bookshop</i>	15
4=)	<i>Tanith Lee: La Vampiresse</i>	14
4=)	<i>Alastair Reynolds: Hideaway</i>	14
but I have one critique. It seems rather unlikely that one can read from someone's DNA what his/her face looks like – too far-fetched for me. Still, a great story.		
Number 2: "The Denebian Cycle" by Keith Brooke and Eric Brown. A story I enjoyed highly, but also here some criticism. If the planet takes 39 years to revolve around its sun, then it must be pretty far away from it. How come then, that the planet is so warm? I also did not understand fully the life-cycle of the Denebians. Nevertheless, a wonderful story.		
Number 1: "Ravenbrand" by Michael Moorcock. A tightly written, exciting fantasy.		
The ten best "normal" shorts for me are:		
1.	"A Change of Yesterday" by Yvonne Navarro	
2.	"All the Roads to Heaven" by Jean-Claude Dunyach	
3.	"Single-Minded" by Tony Ballantyne	
4.	"The Bookshop" by Zoran Zivkovic	
5.	"The Welfare Man Retires" by Chris Beckett	
6.	"The Cone" by Zoran Zivkovic	
7.	"Think Tank" by Mark Dunn	
8.	"At Bud Light Old Faithful" by M. Shayne Bell	
9.	"Cadre Siblings" by Stephen Baxter	
10.	"Balthazar's Demon" by Sarah Singleton	
If I must name an overall winner, then it will be Yvonne Navarro's "A Change of Yesterday." It gave me the shivers!		
<b>Marlies Vaz Nunes</b> Barkelsby, Germany mvaznunes@yahoo.com		

6=)	<i>Catherine S. McMullen: Angel on the Wall</i>	13
6=)	<i>Zoran Zivkovic: The Confessional</i>	13
6=)	<i>Peter F. Hamilton: The Suspect Genome</i>	13
9=)	<i>Keith Brooke: Liberty Spin</i>	12
9=)	<i>Zoran Zivkovic: The Train</i>	12
9=)	<i>Zoran Zivkovic: The Window</i>	12
12)	<i>Chris Beckett: The Marriage of Sky and Sea</i>	11
13=)	<i>Chris Beckett: The Welfare Man Retires</i>	10
13=)	<i>Keith Brooke &amp; Eric Brown: The Denebian Cycle</i>	10
13=)	<i>Jean-Claude Dunyach: All the Roads to Heaven</i>	10
13=)	<i>Michael Moorcock: Ravenbrand</i>	10
13=)	<i>Liz Williams: Dog Years</i>	10
18=)	<i>Mark Dunn: Think Tank</i>	9
18=)	<i>Darrell Schweitzer: The Fire Eggs</i>	9
18=)	<i>Zoran Zivkovic: The Cone</i>	9

Dear Editors:

I have now received my first three issues of *Interzone* and have been suitably impressed with the content and design. I am overjoyed that for only £3 a month I can get access to such high-quality sf stories and from a range of talented authors. Rest assured that I will definitely be renewing my subscription when the time comes.

**Matthew Perks**

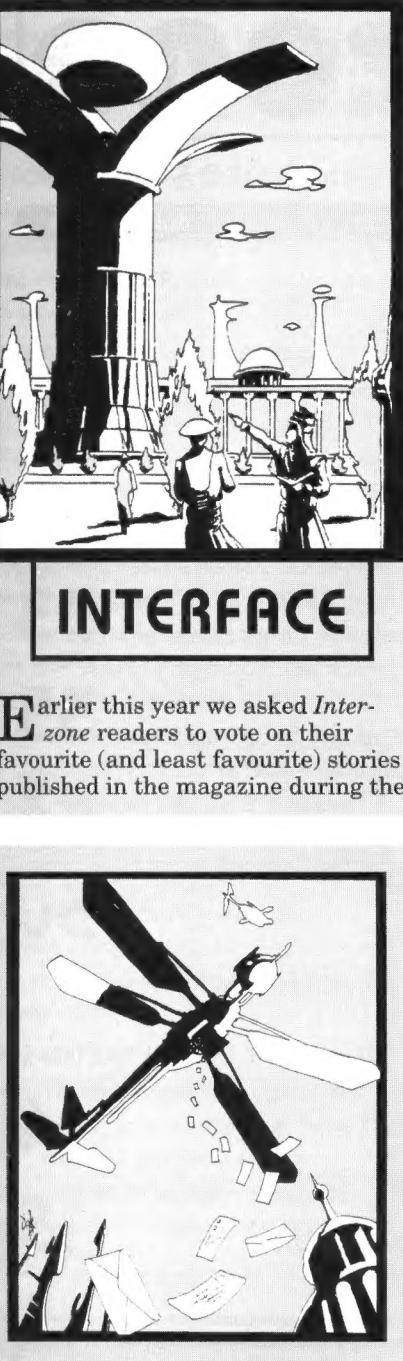
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### The Zebrowski Debate

Dear Editors:

I just thought I'd add my tuppenceworth to the George Zebrowski debate amongst other things. Firstly I would agree with the detractors of said author's recent story ("Catch the Sleep Ship," IZ 163) but would also say that complaining of unoriginality seems a bit harsh. The story was weak compared to most of the usual material; in its defence, I think it achieved what it was supposed to – namely the author reflecting on a "golden age" of sf writing as he sees it. Considering this, perhaps Mr Zebrowski should have avoided fiction as his medium and written an opinion column instead.

The originality thing in sf I find a difficult area. Some people defame contemporary sf authors as unoriginal or derivative because they choose a particular part of the genre to write in which is no longer in vogue, whereas in fantasy literature it seems readers want a certain amount of familiarity which means the stories are judged by the skill



## INTERACTION

Dear Editors:

After I have read a story in *Interzone*, I give it one of three marks: "great," "OK" and "so-so," the latter category including all stories that are so-so down to absolute rubbish (not many of those, though!).

In the 2000 issues, I marked 13 stories as "great," 37 as "OK" and 12 as "so-so." After rereading the "great" stories to find the winner, I decided to divide them into two groups, the "very long" short stories and the "normal" ones.

Of the "very long" ones there were three:

*Number 3: "The Suspect Genome" by Peter F. Hamilton. Very well written,*

*If I must name an overall winner, then it will be Yvonne Navarro's "A Change of Yesterday." It gave me the shivers!*

**Marlies Vaz Nunes**

Barkelsby, Germany

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21=) <i>Paul Di Filippo:</i> Stealing Happy	8	32=) <i>Liz Williams:</i> The Unthinkables	5
21=) <i>Dominic Green:</i> Something Chronic	8	35=) <i>Elizabeth Counihan:</i> Mean Time in Greenwich	4
21=) <i>Zoran Zivkovic:</i> The Atelier	8	35=) <i>Alexander Glass:</i> The Language of the Dead	4
24=) <i>Barrington Bayley:</i> Planet of the Stercorasauri	7	35=) <i>Michael Moorcock:</i> Furniture	4
24=) <i>Paul Di Filippo:</i> Singing Each to Each	7	35=) <i>Yvonne Navarro:</i> A Change of Yesterday	4
24=) <i>Cory Doctorow:</i> The Rebranding of Billy Bailey	7	35=) <i>Sarah Singleton:</i> Balthazar's Demon	4
24=) <i>Charles Stross:</i> Antibodies	7	35=) <i>Liz Williams:</i> The Blood Thieves	4
28=) <i>Stephen Baxter:</i> Cadre Siblings	6	Unfortunately, the remaining 22 stories all scored fewer than four points – after subtracting the negative votes from the positive. Of course, some of those stories gained considerably more than four votes, but near-equal negative votes dragged them down: this was particularly the case with Richard Calder's "Lord Soho" stories, which divided readers as no others.	
28=) <i>Barrington Bayley:</i> The Revolt of the Mobiles	6	Congratulations to <b>Barry Bayley</b> on winning this year's poll. It's the first time he has done so, although he has been a contributor to <i>Interzone</i>	
28=) <i>Chris Beckett:</i> The Gates of Troy	6		
28=) <i>Sean McMullen:</i> Colours of the Soul	6		
32=) <i>Tony Ballantyne:</i> Single-Minded	5		
32=) <i>Alexander Glass:</i> The Watcher's Curse	5		

of the writing – how well-told a good story is. If a lot of readers could let themselves judge sf in such a way maybe there would be less disappointment. The way I see it, authors from yesteryear had a lot more scope to become "classic" as there was less science to deal with, or rather new technology and ideas were much more widely spaced. The leading edge of science post-war was very different after all than it is today. We live in the future they were speculating on.

**Michael Dempster**

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## The Lewes Sanction...

Dear Editors:

Evelyn Lewes does it again, delivering a careless sideswipe to the excellent *Now and Again*, condemned for its use of the "Previously" moment, while neglecting the content, and getting the title wrong. She really should keep her eyes on the road, or stick to tapestry and kittens.

Almost anything except *Lexx* showing up on the Sci-Fi Channel can be presumed to have died and gone to reruns, and *Now and Again* had a single season in 1999. The star, Eric Close, previously appeared in the short-lived UFO invasion series *Dark Skies*, so it was nice to see him get another sf gig, albeit not as prominent or long-running as Jeri Ryan over on *Voyager*. Much better written though.

The thing about *Now and Again* is that the slight fantasy element is underplayed, with almost no wham-bang special effects, and the human predicament

32=) <i>Liz Williams:</i> The Unthinkables	5	since shortly after the magazine began, in 1982. It's pleasing to see a generally under-appreciated veteran of the field score so highly. In strong second place was the relatively new British writer <b>Liz Williams</b> , whose debut novel is just out this year in America. Hard on her heels – and this came as a surprise to us – was the Serbian author <b>Zoran Zivkovic</b> . In fact, all of Zoran's half-dozen stories from last year did remarkably well, and we're delighted – a new loose series of his subtle short tales begins in this issue.
35=) <i>Elizabeth Counihan:</i> Mean Time in Greenwich	4	Tanith Lee, Alastair Reynolds, Catherine McMullen (our youngest-ever contributor), Peter F. Hamilton, Keith Brooke and Chris Beckett all did well by coming in the top dozen. Our congratulations to these writers, and indeed to all the others who reached the top 40. (And commiserations to those who did not: some of the "losers" deserved much better scores, if only in the minority opinion...)
35=) <i>Alexander Glass:</i> The Language of the Dead	4	<b>David Pringle</b>
35=) <i>Michael Moorcock:</i> Furniture	4	
35=) <i>Yvonne Navarro:</i> A Change of Yesterday	4	
35=) <i>Sarah Singleton:</i> Balthazar's Demon	4	
35=) <i>Liz Williams:</i> The Blood Thieves	4	

is placed squarely in the foreground. While the reborn Michael Wiseman saves the world from time to time, we see his widow cope with his death by getting on with her life and raising her daughter. (Two powerful female roles, incidentally.) Not incidentally, we have the thorny relationship between Michael's creator, Dr Morris, played with impeccable *gravitas* by Dennis Haybert, and his creation, who is essentially John Goodman's brain in Eric Close's body. Bringing the two halves of the story together requires a bravura balancing act.

Is it corny? Superficially. Does the repeated intrusion of Michael's secret life into his family's mundane one stretch the laws of probability? Absolutely. Does that matter? Not a whit. The writing sustains it, with wit, empathy and a barbed insight into the human condition.

**Peter Card**

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**Evelyn Lewes replies:** *Matters of opinion are matters of debate, and Mr Card is entitled to differ from me on the quality of Now and Again. However, matters of fact are sacrosanct, and I stuffed this one up big time. How could I get the name of the show wrong? Well, there is an explanation which will probably appear in a forthcoming column, but it is no excuse; so I can only offer my abject apologies to both the readers and to our editor for denting Interzone's otherwise excellent record for factual accuracy. As for Now and Again, I can only thank Mr Card for his excellent*

synopsis. *It makes some sense of what was otherwise complete gibberish at the time (the plot looked like bad Mission Impossible from the 1970s). He will be pleased to know there is a second series premiering (their word) on the Sci-Fi Channel as I write. I don't have time to watch it closely at the moment, but they will no doubt rerun it real soon, and I'll watch it from the beginning and report back.*

## Gilmore on Davidson

Dear Editors:

Chris Gilmore's review of the Avram Davidson book in *Interzone* 167 (May 2001) is filled with errors. The title is given as *Everyone Has Somebody in Heaven* when the title's first word is *Everybody*; the name "Slonin" should be "Slonim" in the story title; and he cites Davidson's "Now Let Us Sleep" as "Let Us Sleep, Now." (I thought the review implied that the story is included in *Everybody has Somebody in Heaven*, which it's not, but perhaps I just read too much into the piece.)

I thought someone should point out these unfortunate errors.

**Gordon Van Gelder**

Editor/Publisher, Fantasy & Science Fiction

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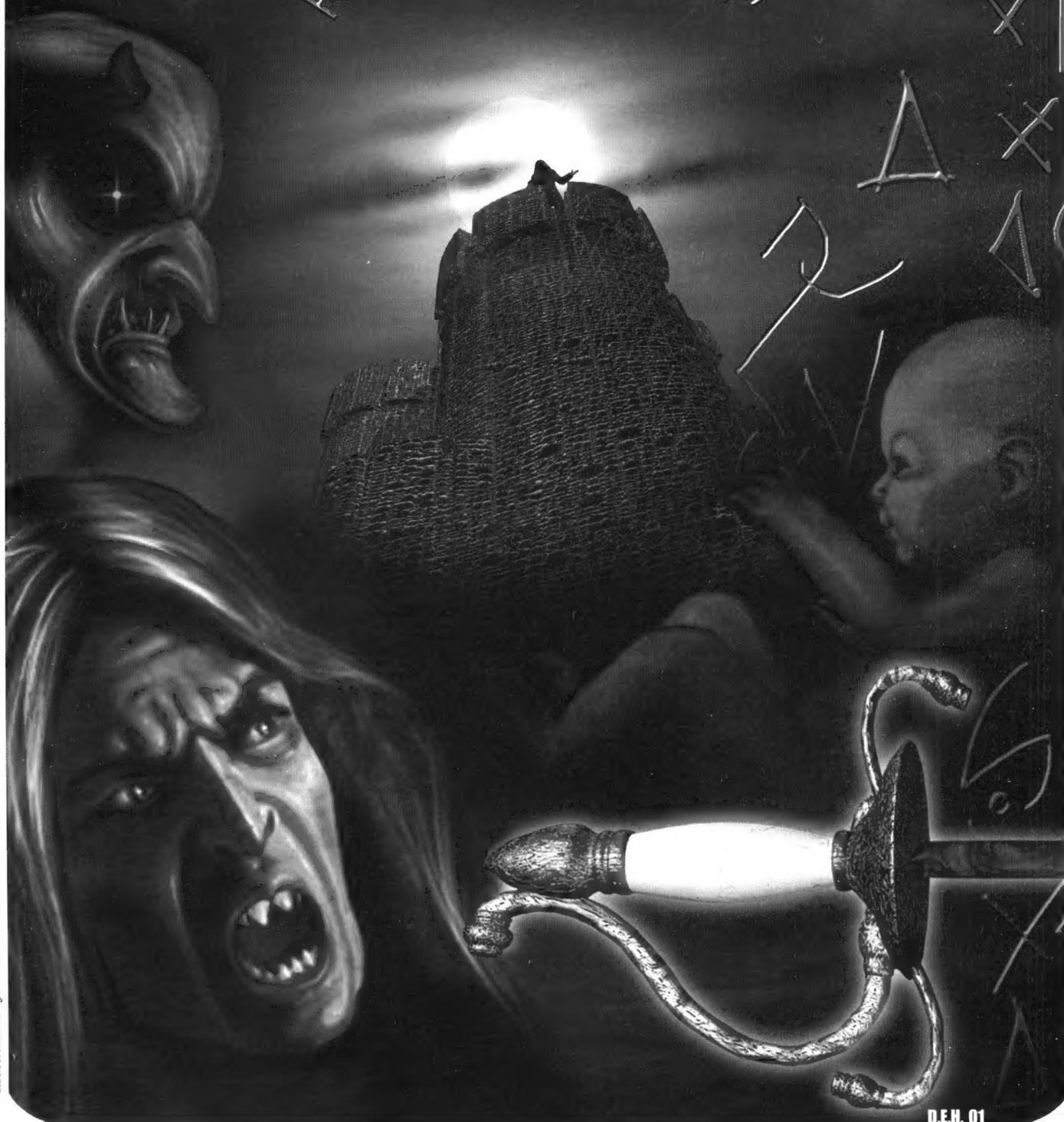
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# Espritu Santo

Richard Calder



*"Roo-too-to-rooey!"*

I stood flush against the battlements. It was a little past midnight. And ever since my half-hunter had chimed the hour I had been baying incessantly at the moon. My hollers and shrieks had set up a sympathetic chorus amongst feral creatures, both animal and human, that prowled about the foot of my ancestral manor, had awoken my neighbours to angry remonstrance, and might well have turned the wits of the moon itself, if I had not been sure that, like the rest of creation, it was already quite, quite mad.

I had been meditating upon whether or not to consign my baby son, and then myself, to the pavings 300 feet below. As on so many other nights during my two weeks of leave, I had, after much staring into the shadows that swirled meaninglessly about my bed, at last got up – abandoning my wife to her callous repose – and made my way to the top of the bell tower. Only on this, my last night before returning to the front, I had made an inspired detour to the nursery and taken my son from his crib before proceeding up the long, winding stairs. Procrastination had so often got the better of me that I had determined that one thing alone would take me to the point of no return and thus expedite my release: infanticide.

I swayed back and forth on my heels, my son held tightly in my arms. Pulling back the blanket I bestowed a last kiss upon his pale, almost limpid, brow. How beautiful he was. Richard Pike the 13th, my first-born, destined to be the fifth Lord Soho, if not for the despair of his master and the cruelty of his dame. How unaccountably beautiful! His angelic features without trace of the contamination that flowed through my own veins. A contamination that had been with my family ever since the first Richard Pike had got an orc woman with child and acknowledged that child as his own. Bitterly, I recalled the old snatch that my father had sung in happier days.

*"Oh slumber, my darling, thy sire is a knight,  
Thy mother's a lady so lovely and bright;  
The hills and the dales, and the tow'rs which you see,  
They all shall belong, my dear creature, to thee."*

But the world had been taken from us. The orcs had returned in greater numbers, and with a pitilessness of will not seen since they chose to cloister themselves in their subterranean haunts some half a millennium ago. Humankind had retreated into its walled cities, and hill and dale, or rather, the monstrous explosions of putrid vegetation that they had become, belonged to the enemy. "Richard Pike the 13th," I said, in a hot, tremulous whisper. "Unlucky for some." He began to cry. I extended my arms, holding him over the void. And then I rocked him.

*"Hush-a-bye, baby, upon the tree top,  
When the wind blows the cradle will rock,  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,  
Down comes the baby and cradle and all."*

For me, the world was without prospect of joy. The war was to blame, of course. The endless carnage. The random

slaughter. But a share of blame, and perhaps the greater share, could be as easily apportioned to my wife. It would be only a matter of time before my precious boy, grown to manhood in a world of perpetual bloodshed and maternal deceit, came to appreciate my sense of futility and desperation. Better this rough exent, then. There was, I knew, no other escape. Certain people, they say, carry something in their hereditary make-up that gives them a susceptibility to addiction. For some this means alcohol, drugs, food or sex. And for others, I suppose, a stupendous combination of all these things, and more. Intimacy was my addiction. A certain kind of corrosive intimacy. I had long promised myself I would leave Joan and never return. But I always returned, telling myself that next time it would be different: that I had nowhere else to go; that this was all I was good for; that the cultivation of our unequal relationship, in which I played the long-suffering father and she, the spoilt, if beloved, brat, was indeed to be the purpose of my life, if its burden, also. For what else might a man like me – one of Nature's little mistakes – truly expect? Certainly not the rapport one expects to find in more symmetrical unions. Certainly not the emotional and intellectual reciprocity of kindred hearts and minds. No. I was trapped. And during the nights that I had stood crowing my agony to the stars I had come to the conclusion that the only freedom I would enjoy would be the freedom of the grave.

The baby grew heavy. His bawling, upturned face screwed itself into an inarticulate criticism of my motives, suggesting, perhaps – sweet, foolish boy that he was – that I might not have his best interests at heart. I averted my gaze. Readied myself to follow him on what would soon be his downward trajectory into blessed nothingness. Across town, beyond London's walls, was the red glow of encampments and trenches. Searchlights panned the skies, and, occasionally, a flare would illuminate the enemy positions. Sometimes, even the hell-mouth itself. And farther away, shrouded by the night, yet haunting me with such persistence that they might well have been visible, were the colossal forms that ringed London's hills, glowing in the depths of my mind like gold at the bottom of a dark yet translucent lake. Forms that watched over the tribulations of humankind with the cool detachment of the gods that some thought them to be.

The nothingness beckoned. And the knowledge that a failure of nerve would mean returning to a nothingness more bleak, more terrible, than anything death might offer, emboldened me. I prepared to commit my son to the void. And thereby irrevocably commit myself.

*"Nooooo – not the baby!"*

I swung about so swiftly that he was almost precipitated into the void by mischance rather than design. Stock-still, I hugged the child to my breast, the small of my back against a parapet, staring into my wife's tearful eyes.

*"Please, Ritchie, not this way! Not the baby!"*

"This way? No. It's always *your* way, isn't it?" I said, with the profound calmness of a man who has passed his mental limits, and is about to disappear into the black, dimensionless vanishing point of sanity. "It's always what *Joanie* wants."

It had been a spring-autumn wedding. Or spring-winter, perhaps. She had been 16. I had been 92. One of the Darkling Isle's few nonagenarians able to afford the pharmaceutical regimen that conferred rejuvenescence. No fool like an old fool, especially one relieved of the physical burden of the years, but not their superannuated hopes. "If I had ever had a word of genuine kindness from you it might have been different," I continued. "But such kindness as I have had has been meted out by an arch manipulator. Admit it, you married me for my money. The chance to be Lady Soho. You've never loved me. Never." The tears flowed down her plump, girlish cheeks. She shook her head and moaned.

"It's not true. I *do* love you." But I was as inured to her cant as to her histrionics. And sensing my resolve, her aspect darkened, her white, faultless complexion suddenly an adult version of my son's, prune-like with mute reproach. My wife's method of control did not rely upon shrewishness alone. No. Her moments of surrender, her woman's tears, were as much responsible for the outlandish conditions of peace I would concede to as her tireless campaigns of verbal, and sometimes physical, violence. The tears gushed the more. And I must admit I felt my old misogynistic heart weaken. But what tenderness I might have claimed if I had seized the moment and submitted to her puerile will was rapidly disappearing. Within moments, her more familiar plate-smashing, table-turning, oath-screaming fury would be to the fore. "Give me the baby this second, Ritchie, or I swear, and on the good book, too, that I'll bloody well swing for you!" Her teeth were clenched, the steel coil that ran through the silly little street Arab I had married tautening in preparation for the offensive. Fists raised, she essayed a step towards me. "Perhaps I do only care about your money. Why else should I have wasted my time on such a little toad of a man? Those horrible drugs you take might lend you the appearance of a 21-year-old, but they can't straighten out your bones or rearrange your phiz. You're an ugly rotter, Ritchie. Always have been, always will be. But then, of course" – she held a hand before her own inestimably beautiful face, fanned her fingers and affected to examine her manicure – "you're a Pike." She looked me in the eye. "Dear, dear" – she had begun to put on the "posh" accent that always made such a travesty of her demotic vowels – "the things a girl must do if she is to stand a chance of rising out of Soho's gutters."

I hissed. Ran my tongue over rows of sharp little teeth. Looked to the ground, where the moon cast my dromedary shadow across the flagstones. I rocked the baby more vigorously. His crying had intensified. "What a cross child!" I said, giggling with self-conscious nastiness, content, for the while, to up the ante of my wife's melodramatic rant. "I can't bear cross children." Joan took another step towards me. "Not too near," I said. "No, not too near, my sweet, or you shall never see little Richard again."

The muscles in her face strained to contrive a smile. "Times are hard," she said, her voice calculatedly subdued, the pendulum of her temper once more swinging towards compliance and reconciliation. "And you've been under a lot of pressure. But think. You don't have to go back to the front. You can hide. Here. Deep beneath the house. In the

old dungeons. The crypts and cellars of Castle Soho."

"And what of honour?"

"And when have you ever cared for honour, husband?"

"More times than you may care to know. I do not, I am afraid, possess your glib powers of mendacity. But what could I expect a little fool like you to know of honour." She stepped closer. With one hand, I reached out for my crutch. I could spy no candlestick, paperweight or household article of more blatant lethality concealed about her person, but if she were determined upon some bloody recourse, then I would treat her in kind.

"Perhaps," she said, her elocutionary pretensions attaining the level of the cosmically pathetic, "perhaps, malformed gudgeon that you are, I have been more dis honourable than you suppose." Her voice had become so low that I was forced to cock my head, the better to hear her over the lamentations of the creatures of the streets. I knew from experience that when she exhibited calmness such as this it always presaged a storm. Shrinking into myself, and preparing for the worst, I took hold of the crutch, put the crosspiece under my right armpit and made ready to raise the staff and ward her off with its long, pointed ferrule. "Do you really think such a beautiful child could have sprung from the loins of a wretched beak-nosed hunchback like yourself?"

I looked down at my son, back into the eyes of my erstwhile child-bride, then finally at the flagstones, where the dwarfish, crookbacked shadow, with its skinny little legs and grotesque pot-bellied profile made all the more notable by a great, hooked nose that my wife had euphemistically called a "beak," testified to the force of her argument.

"We Pikes have not all been hideous," I ventured. "It was inevitable that, with the dilution of the family curse, an heir would be born in whom there would be no trace of orc, or indeed any other element of perversity." She continued on her stalker's progress, each footfall lithe as a cat's and suggestive of a vast, amoral grace. With one hand, I crushed the child against the broad, ermine-trimmed lapel of my dressing gown, the welling of love in my bosom translating itself into a covetousness of all that was still innocent in this world. "He is mine. Every accursed corpuscle of my inheritance says so. He is the salve of my broken, twisted form. He is the Soho, the new Lord Soho, who will wash away the sins of his clan and inherit a new Earth!"

She stood a few feet from me, an eyebrow lifted in ironic disdain. There had been no median in this marriage. I had either to spoil her, cajole her, tickle her, tell her I would never leave her, or retreat before the barrage of her fishwoman's ire. But if her character knew only two extremes – that of a whining, though sometimes affecting, child, and that of a shrill, cheap-mouthed haridan – then tonight she had reconciled her opposites. And the cool measure of her regard chilled my bones.

"You were made a cuckold some time ago," she said, with an intrepidity that suddenly made me aware of what should have been the less than incredible truth. "Now give me the baby. You cannot love him. At least, not enough to destroy him, surely? And you may be certain he will never love you." She crossed her arms over a perilously low-cut

neckline whose twinned improprieties of opulent flesh I had always found magnificently vulgar. "Nobody can."

"But you said —" *You said you did love me*, I thought. *Said, on so many occasions, that you would always love me. Love me until the end of time.* Though I had long known her assertions of devotion to be shallow, and almost invariably followed by pleas for hard cash, and though she had always revealed herself, in her little, everyday acts of dishonesty, to be an unprincipled liar, confirmation was still painful. Perhaps all the more painful in that I had long felt the abyss of betrayal opening up but had refused to believe, until this night, that it could devour me. "You said —" I found that I had insufficient sobriety of mind to complete the sentence. Her bald confession — with its fleshing out of the phantoms that had haunted me for over eleven years — threatened to induce in me a fit of riotous crying analogous to that of my son. My throat tightened. Became dry. As dry as the invisible threads that bound the universe together. That, like my mind, seemed about to snap, setting stars and planets free from their orbits and spinning into the black hole that was existence's icy heart.

But I did not cry. In place of tears, a cold anger swept through my body. I shivered. I ground my teeth together. I glowered. And then anger became disgust.

"You odious little whore," I said. "I've done everything for you. Bought you out of the brothel. Paid off your pimp. Given you a home, food, clothes, jewellery, French perfume and toys. Given you, for God's sake, a name, a *title*. All I've ever asked for in return is a little affection. Not much. Just a little. But how do you repay me? With lies, thieving and unfaithfulness." I stamped a slippers foot upon the cold stones, the harsh noise eliciting a doomy if barely perceptible knell from the tower's disused bell. "The gutter, it seems, is all you're good for!"

"Hand over the baby," she said, lips trembling and cheeks crimson with alarm. "Or I'll call the police and have you locked up!"

She came on. Joan was a small woman, but like almost all her sex, a good head and shoulders taller than myself. And so it was that when, with a hoarse whoop, I swung my crutch from the ground in a great arc that put its steel ferrule on a course that seemed certain to inflict a corporeal wound across her cheek that would for ever remind her of the pain she had caused Richard Pike, fourth Lord Soho, I toppled backwards with the effort, and my arm — which, in exerting itself, had to cope with the gross counterweight of my hump — dropped. Fatally dropped. For the sweep of the vengeful staff decayed to the extent that the ferrule cut, not across her cheek, but her neck, compounding a punishment that I had meant to be severe, but not, in the end, so mortal.

"Joan?" But I was already tipping over the parapet, the unnatural centre of gravity of a four-foot, ten-inch man with wasted legs, but broad, powerful shoulders surmounted by a huge, protuberant mass of flesh and bone, carrying me backwards now, relentlessly. The crutch pointed to the stars, and then, as I sought to regain balance, clicked and scratched against the stone coping, its noise, combined with the wheezing of my lungs, reminiscent of a giant bug attempting to skitter up an enamel

wall. As sky and earth changed places I was granted a last glimpse of the rooftop: a ghastly tableau featuring a young woman in her nightshirt, one hand to her throat, a bib of blood forming over her breasts, her eyes opened shockingly wide, upturned and as white as if they had been bleached with carbolic.

My last conscious deed, before my powers of deliberation were lost to a great bowel-wrenching rush of fear, was to try to tuck the baby into an embrasure; but my legs were over my head before I was given the opportunity, and the next second I was tumbling through space, knowing only that, in deciding after all that my son should live, indeed that we both should live, and that the horror of life was nothing compared to the dread vacuum of hope that would soon envelop me, I had let him slip from my grasp. Procrastination had lost out to mischance, and thought and action were, at last, unhappily consolidated.

The fall was long. Long enough to fill me with barren wonder. Not so much at all that I was bidding goodbye — for that, I decided, amounted to little — but at the dross which would follow me into the perpetual realms of death, the effluvia of crime, shame and infinite despair. My dressing gown flapped about my arms like the patagium of one of the enemy. Tumbling, cursing, wincing, defecating — the long façade of the bell tower receding with dizzy haste to have all done — I plunged to the level of the square's humbler abodes, their rooftops passing over my head as the parabola of my descent delivered me to the darkness immediately above the fenced-in square. I began to spin, a horizon of grey walls pirouetting in sympathy, a mad carnival of faces, glib with a horror that only I, that night, could claim expert knowledge of, silhouetted against spectral casements, dormers and oriels. Faces that, for all I knew, revealed a satisfaction at having the promise of sleep returned. Time distended. For a moment I had seemed to hover, and I pedalled furiously at the air, subscribing to the desperate illusion that I might re-ascend to the point from which I had taken infelicitous wing. But the universe could hardly be expected to neglect the foreclosure necessary to my doubly damnable state for long. The illusion evaporated; again, I plummeted earthwards. Below, dogs, cats, tramps, waifs and nameless discrepancies of what passed these days for "human" looked up to identify the nature of the screaming form that they may well have momentarily thought to be an incoming shell, and then scattered, to leave only street lamps, a fouled pavement and a brutal *cheval-de-frise* of railings to greet me. I closed my eyes.

"Roo-too-to-rooey!"

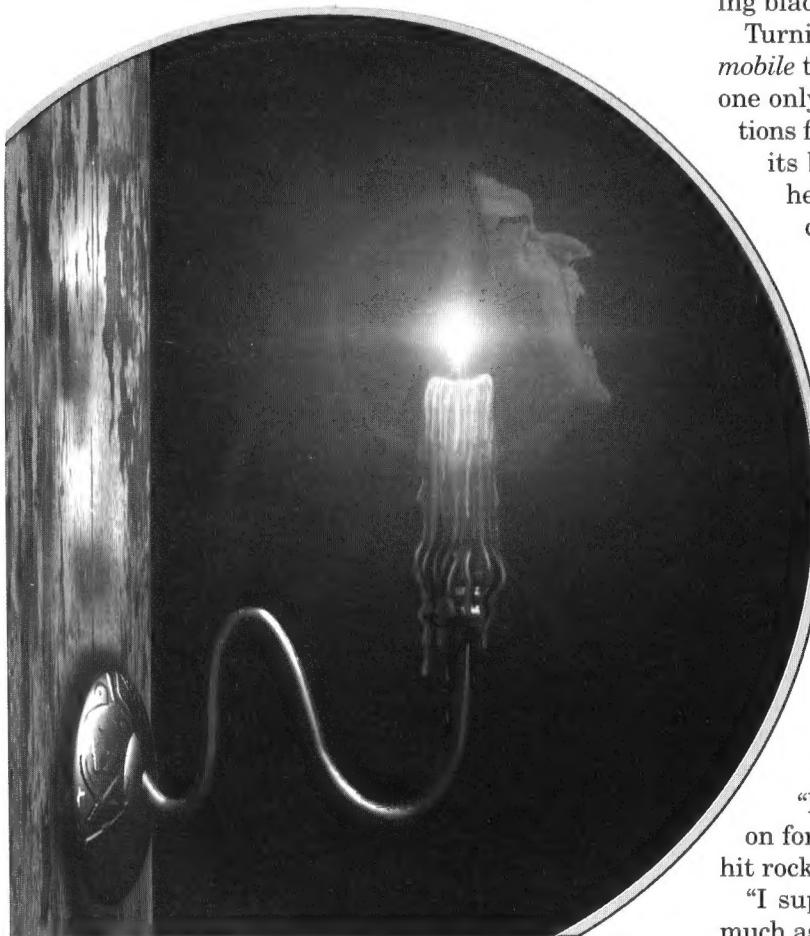
But the ground, though it tore upwards with deadly conviction, hesitated to introduce itself. And then seemed to comprehensively snub me. I fell straight through cobblestones, basements, foundations and the full strata of the hypostatic aeons, as if they had not been there. Fell, until I came to a place of darkness and dreams, deep, deep at the centre of myself.

DX.2

Dazed, I wandered beneath Castle Soho, padding through its vast network of passageways and vaults, alert only to

the drip-drip of water, the scuttling of rats, and my own shadow going before me, unaware, for the greater part, of what had happened, or even who I was. My flesh was numb – so numb that I was convinced that it had been discarded, my nerve endings those of a spirit, perhaps, striving incompetently to apprehend the particulars of a yet unassimilated order, an ethereality of the damned. Sometimes, a voice would drift down through the beamed ceiling. *"Poor man! How pale he looks! I'll feel his pulse. One, two, 14, nine, eleven. Hi! Are you dead? Are you dead? Are you dead?"* I walked on. The air was damp. I pulled up my ermine lapels, my head contracting into the dark recess between my unevenly distributed shoulders.

Despite the knowledge that I walked below my own house and the disjointed remarks that percolated through the stone, I might as well have been floating in some black waste of the senses, dead in spirit as much as body. Yet I felt an unaccountable calmness. *"He's killed his wife and bibby,"* a second voice exclaimed. *"Would you Adam and Eve it. He's done them in proper. And him a lord of the realm, too."* Calmness left me. Not because the comment had been unjustified, but because I had detected a plebeian inflection to the speaker's voice, and because I knew I could be judged only by my fellow peers. Stung by the impertinence, I decided to respond. To defend the indefensible. But the words I heard coming out of my mouth seemed to belong to another, as if, in dying, my behaviour had acquired a coarseness appropriate to my new station amongst the lowest of the low: *"I have had a misfortune; the child was so terrible cross, I throwed it out the winder!"*



I continued on my progress. In the past, when I had had more leisure, I had explored these subterranean regions. And, I had thought, explored them thoroughly. But I had entered upon a quarter where everything was unfamiliar, a multi-chambered enclave that seemed to pre-date the house above.

The mazy thoroughfares were lit; somebody had been expecting me. I passed under arches, some crumbling, others evincing more radical depredations, and then descended, by way of various stairways, ever deeper into the Earth. I came upon wine cellars, storerooms and armouries. Little remained to indicate their original function: a slew of cobwebbed, but empty, wine racks, a pile of moth-eaten books, a collection of antique musketry and swords. And from time to time I would come upon a human skeleton, confirming the rumours that those of my family whose humanitarian sentiments were, I like to think, less developed than my own, had employed these dark, dank underground chambers as places of confinement for those whose personal slights they had seen fit not to endure.

As I passed under an arch somewhat more imposing than those that had gone before I came to a halt, and not merely because the chamber in front of me represented a dead end, with no passageway or stair communicating with a connecting room or deeper level, but because of what punctuated that terminus's derelict shell. A sword that, in many ways, was like those that littered the forgotten armouries I had only recently left behind. And yet as different as telephony, radio, petrochemicals and plastics were to the age of swords that that solitary, glittering blade so potently evoked.

Turning on its axis, it hung in midair, a *perpetuum mobile* that might, I apprehended with the certainty that one only has in dreams, have performed its slow gyrations for centuries. It was a Toledo blade. A rapier. And

its blue-veined steel reflected the candlelight that here substituted for the prevailing electricity. The coruscation sent a kaleidoscopic array of circles, rectangles, parallelograms and lozenges dancing across the walls. And by virtue of their variegated light I despaired hieroglyphs and graffiti scored into the sweating, mould-encrusted plaster: signs and icons that my own experience of warfare had taught me were not the work of men, ancient or modern, but the fell work of goblins. I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck. For it seemed I had penetrated the outskirts of the Netherworld.

"You have fallen here?" said a voice I immediately knew to belong to the sword, even though it emanated from within my own skull.

"I've been falling all my life."

"Ah, like all your family."

"I have no family. Not any more. I killed them."

"I mean to say, this fall of yours: it has been going on for generations. You are merely the Pike who has hit rock bottom, yes?"

"I suppose so. We Pikes are accursed. And none so much as me, it seems. Born ugly, I was fated to do uglier

things. It is as well I no longer walk the face of the Earth. But it is not so well I am still here in spirit. I wish to be gone. Comprehensively *gone*. To a place where there is no more pain." Like attendant spirits, mocking my failure to achieve nullity, the colourful, geometric shapes continued to dance about the chamber in time to the sword's languorous carousel.

"I am not your judge, Richard. Neither am I some kind of preternatural anaesthetist. But I *am* here to offer you the possibility of atonement. Do you not know what, or who, I am?"

"My father talked of a sword –"

"Then he would have talked of *Espirito Santo*."

Abruptly, the sword stopped rotating. The chamber had been silent, without echo or other acknowledgement that our words disturbed the air and not just my mind. But now another, more palpable stillness had descended, one that had suddenly announced itself by way of a sort of inverted thunderclap whose reverberations left me isolated in a perfect and terrible limbo. A place outside time, but infinitely distant from eternity.

"The sword that was lost," I murmured. "The old family heirloom. The sword that, according to legend, represents the holy spirit of another universe." I stepped forward. "How is it I have found you?"

"Come nearer, Richard Pike."

I walked towards the centre of the chamber. When I came within a few feet of the flashing sword, I halted, gazing into the hypnotic, highly polished flat of its blade. My reflection stared back, as if from a thin, elegant, fun-house mirror, face distorted by its cambered surface and made ridiculously beautiful. I laughed.

"Do you know who I am now, Richard?"

"You're me," I said. "You've always been me."

"I have always been *with* you, that is true. I came into your family's possession many centuries ago, when the lost tribes of the perverse sought sanctuary beneath the Earth's surface. I was perverse too, of course. But not like the tribespeople. The cataclysm that destroyed the world of my birth – a parallel world that showered your own world with the fragmented consciousnesses of its inhabitants – left my spirit intact. And just as I had chosen this sword as a sanctum, and not a human mind, the better that I should retain my integrity, so it was that I chose to stay on the surface of the planet that the perverse was destined one day to rule. I slept. Slept through the countless wars between the Netherworld and Earth-Above. Slept in despair at the degeneracy of my people. In despair that they would never be reborn. It was the notorious orc-slayer, Richard Pike, who, of course, at last disturbed my slumbers. And I flew from the confines of this steel to find a home in his warrior's soul. For though I once disdained to deliquesce into so base a vehicle as the *human*, I had myself become as lost as my people, a diaspora of one, you might say, an exile desperate for the life that you so profligately enjoy in Time. So it is that, though few of your line have known it, sword and swordsman have since been one. You, Richard Pike, twelfth of that name, are the still living spirit of an otherwise dead universe. You are *Espirito Santo*."

"Yes," I murmured, feeling the power stir within me. "An angel. A guardian angel. An angel that will blow the trump announcing the last day. I have the perverse in my veins. I have always known that. The first Richard Pike got an orc woman with child, and –"

"It is not your orc blood that speaks, Richard. It is that holy spirit of place that antedates the Dark Ages, a spirit that existed before my universe died into your own, and which exists still, in the creature that is you and me. For twelve generations of Pikes I have been growing. Gestating in the womb that is your family's ancestral soul. And now I am ready to be born in flesh. To herald the end of this world, and the coming of the next. The world in which my people *will* be reborn. For humanity has run its course, and the dark, violent beauty of a cosmos that you cannot begin to understand will at last be resurrected, here, amongst those whose minds and bodies we first parasitized, but will now ultimately usurp, the Earth at last transfigured into the likeness of my home – a kingdom that passed away in cataclysm, but which will soon be restored in all its power and glory!"

The silence roared, urging me to fill it, if not with such rhetorical fervour. "You speak of an end to time," I said. "But will there then at last be an end to me?"

"Is that all you wish for, Richard Pike? To leave this world?"

"I wish for an end – yes, for myself. For others, I wish that time should not so much end as be undone."

"You wish to see your wife and child? You place your hope" – a note of querulous disbelief had entered the voice – "not in the rebirth of my species but in the resurrection of your own dead?"

"Will you grant me that?"

"You will serve me. You have no other choice. We are one. It must be so. But yes, if it be your pleasure, I will allow your wife and son to tarry here on Earth. But not you, Richard. You must depart. You must go to where I presently dwell, as must all humanity that has not been granted our boon: the half-world that my kind have inhabited since we were expelled from our place of origin. The great song that has been humankind must end. Only then may the forms that haunt the forests of your Darkling Isle be released from the confines of eternity. Only then may they enjoy the Time that they have hungered for during the mournful days of their exclusion, the broken, fragmented days when they had hardly dared believe that they would ever again be whole."

"My wife and child returned to life? You swear that it will be so?"

"Reach out, Richard. Touch me. Weigh *Espirito Santo* in your hand. And *know* that it will be so."

Tentatively, I reached out and threaded my fingers through the sword's filigree guard and then closed them over the ebony hilt. Immediately, I felt an intimacy that I knew was the counterpart of that which I had both desired and been addicted to all my life, but which I had hitherto never suspected to exist except as one of the comforts of illusion. This, I told myself, with a measure of wonder and bitterness, was the only intimacy I would henceforth have reason to exalt in, complain of and

return to. And the only one I would need.

I made to lift the sword above my head. It fairly jumped into the air, as if impatient to satisfy me, the blade light as gossamer and informed with an intelligence that, I knew, would be the commander of my arm and the caretaker of my spirit until the end, whether it be of myself or the world.

With the sword held high, and the candlelight playing off its blade so that the steel seemed like a tongue of argent flame, I filled the empty vaults with the battle cry of my forebears: "*Espíritu Santo!*"

And then, darkness. A breeze had gusted from nowhere and the candles had been uniformly snuffed out. Panicking, I floundered through a pitchy absence of form that might have represented the deep before God had created the heavens, earth and Richard Pike. As my cry reverberated through the labyrinthine depths its numerous echoes transformed themselves into voices. A multitude of voices, none of them my own.

"I never heard a dead man speak before, constable."

"Brandy and water, somebody!"

"It's a miracle. He should have broken every bone in his body."

"He might have wished he had. I'm not so sure I should be wasting my time on someone who's destined for the gallows."

And then the darkness spread from my optic nerve and insinuated itself into the deepest environs of my brain, the small flicker that was my consciousness snuffed out as effectively as the candles. I swooned, surrendering to the cool, velvet night.

Again, voices. Manifold voices, and many other things, too, denotative of morbid curiosity having got the better of a population whose more respectable representatives should have been observing curfew. I heard the sound of sirens, then nothing. Nothing save the knowledge – conferred in the brief intervals when a scrap of sentience would return – that I had been lifted off the pavement, put in a car and was being driven through the unquiet streets. But it was enough to inform me that the promises of the sword called *Espíritu Santo* were as insubstantial as all else that had been conjured up by my dream-laden concussion.



The benches were full. Some lords and ladies stood in the aisles. Even the queen was in attendance, the gossip at court doubtless hinting that the day's business promised to be amusing, and that an hour or two spent in the ancient halls of Westminster might alleviate the tedium of a winter's day.

I was secured to an iron chair, my wrists and ankles shackled to its rests and supports, my feet dangling above the chamber's plush red carpet. The two men who had carried me in and set me down in front of the woolsack drew away, and the Lord Chancellor, looking up from a sheaf of well-thumbed notes, regarded me with rheumy-eyed circumspection. "I always feared it might come to this, young Soho. I always told your father you'd come to no good." The

central heating was turned, it seemed, to maximum, and in my ermine robes and coronet I sweated like a pig, though not one, I hoped, that this gathering of cantankerous Methuselahs were going to make squeal, no matter how viciously they might stick me. "I won't waste the house's time by expounding upon the events of the last 48 hours. Suffice to say that you, Richard Pike, fourth Lord Soho, have been summoned here as a self-confessed wife-killer, and, what is more, the murderer of your child and heir. A formal plea of guilty would be much appreciated. It will not have escaped your notice that this realm is at war. And your peers have more pressing matters to discuss."

"Guilty it is," I said. "And do not lecture me about the urgency of a war that I have spent so much time, labour and blood in trying to end. This house, after all, has become known for its cowardly evasions, its inability to embrace the only solution left to us, fearful as it is that the radical technologies I have championed may destroy, not only the enemy, but its privileges." I turned my head left, then right, treating my audience to the full repertoire of a music-hall villain's scowls, ogles, leers and dirty looks. Several women looked away, one – an old dame with the virginal, strawberries and cream complexion of someone a tenth of her age – taking out a lace handkerchief and pressing it to her mouth before giving a little cough of revulsion. "Guilty," I reiterated. "Now let us have done with this."

"But before," said another voice, "we have done with *him*, I beg leave to put a few questions to the prisoner, so that the house may be clarified upon a number of points." I sought to identify the speaker from the anonymous morass of ermine. I succeeded only when he stood to take the floor. It was Lord Bayswater. A man whose descendants had been numbered amongst my family's bitterest enemies.

"Ah, Bayswater," said the Lord Chancellor, somewhat put out of countenance. "Really, is this –?"

"There is precedent, my lord."

"Yes, yes, there is precedent. Very well." The Lord Chancellor sighed. "But be concise, please. We have a busy day ahead of us." Bayswater swept back his robes, stood akimbo and gazed down from his vantage point, fixing me with his iron-grey stare. "This assertion of yours that we hear about: that your wife declared, before you so barbarically slew her, that the child was not your own: was it this, Lord Soho, that put you over the edge, so to speak, if you will, hem, forgive my choice of phrase?" There was a swell of laughter amongst the assembly that died almost as soon as it had breached my ears. Not content to have me consigned to the lime, Bayswater meant to humiliate me, it seemed, to make my great name a thing of mockery. I did not wonder at it. He had always been jealous of my war record. Of the esteem with which I had been regarded at the front, and the influence I had wielded over the high command that had been out of all proportion to my humble commission. His purpose, now, was to undermine whatever influence I still had upon the house. And he would do so by having my fellow peers forget their horror of my crimes in their eagerness to utterly despise me. For whereas each lord and lady present – wretched, depraved creatures that they were – might

imagine, or indeed contrive, a death for their burdensome spouse or offspring similar to that which I had perpetrated upon my own, they would not have dared permit themselves to have sympathy for one who had allowed himself to be so easily betrayed. A cuckold, in English high society, was beneath contempt.

"Hang me and have done with it," I said, for what I hoped would be the final time.

"So you have said, so you have said," replied Bayswater, airily. "But we cannot simply stretch a man's neck, and especially not a fellow peer's, without trying to understand his motives. Or do you, Lord Soho, have such disdain for due process of law?"

"Law? You know as well as I do that the law of this country is arbitrary. Or if you do not know, then perhaps" – and I lifted my gaze to stare at the crone who, for the last 20-odd years, had lived inside the body of a 13-year-old girl – "you do, madam."

"I know that *you*, Lord Soho," returned the monstrous anomaly that was my queen, with that engineered lisp of hers that so appealed to her present favourite, the sweet-toothed octogenarian, Lord Kilburn. "I know that you, uxoricide and infanticide that you have so predictably revealed yourself to be, have always been one to give us *problems*." Kilburn belonged to Bayswater's claque, and had, of late, filled the queen's ears with poisonous rumours as to my loyalty, compounding the prejudices she had long held towards any whose physical beauty was less than immaculate.

"Yes?" broke in Lord Bayswater. "The tactics, and, indeed, overall strategy, that he has often recommended have been nothing short of suicidal! And these latest plans, this big push qualified by ancient *diablerie* – it is, of course, madness. Pure madness!" Like me, he was a centurion, but one who had been returned to a state of youth in which chiselled good looks had only been accentuated by the steely, not to say – for such were the tastes of the queen – brutal characteristics of his extreme age. "It often seems that the man means to kill us all!" he added. I tried to remember when that leonine mane had been as grey as his eyes. When his skin had hung in great folds from his skeletal face. It was impossible. But if death was a dream to those whose coffers bought them a new, eternal youth, it was a dream that I would soon wake from. And then, perhaps, disengumbered of flesh and all its attendant illusions, my ghost would see things as they were: that England, behind its façade of zest and vigour, was a wasted, lifeless fraud whose gaudy renascence had been unable to relieve the logjam of the war. Only the most daring and extreme measures, I had decided, could offer a true hope for a cessation of hostilities. "Let Her Highness remember," my old adversary concluded, "that Soho is one of those erstwhile mercenaries, a *black knight*, and that his allegiances have always been in question. Good God, it is a well enough known fact that the man has the blood of our enemy running in his very veins!"

"Same old song, Bayswater?" I said tiredly. "You were instrumental in having my family banished to the wastes. It took us centuries to reclaim our title. And now, not content that my line has been ground into the dust, you wish to take away my reputation, too."

"We are not concerned about the prisoner's military career," said the Lord Chancellor, taking out his watch and shaking his head, "nor are we overly concerned about his genetic inheritance."

"However much he may be ugly!" interpolated the queen, breaking into one of her girlish fits of giggles that were the delight of her admirers and the terror of her foes. The two exotic rarities – more pets, really, than guards – who stood to either side of her throne remained stony-faced, providing the only exception to what quickly became a sycophantic chorus of general merriment. They were pinheads. Specially bred, eight feet tall, microcephalic, killing machines, the bodyguards of choice for those traditionalists amongst the Darkling Isle's autocracy who found the modern fighting man, with his pretensions to worth and freedom, vulgar beyond compare. "Ugly, ugly, ugly!" shrilled the queen, between bursts of uncontrollable laughter.

"That is so, Your Majesty," said the Lord Chancellor. "But if I may recall us all to the matter at hand: since the prisoner has pleaded guilty, we may, with Your Majesty's permission, dispense, I feel, with the need for a vote, and proceed directly to sentencing, and thus, as I have previously submitted, expedite the day's other business."

"Then you admit it, Lord Soho. You cut your lovely wife's throat and dashed your little baby's brains out on the pavement!" vociferated the queen, giggling all the louder, like a child who cannot quite believe that it has dared to be so forward.

"He has indeed admitted it, Your Majesty," said the Lord Chancellor, with barely concealed disaffection. "Heinous crimes, to be sure. But he is guilty, yes indeed, he has said so. And now Your Majesty, the question of –"

"Yes, yes, yes. I know. I *know*. But before I put a noose about his neck," said the queen, "let me put a few questions to him." Bayswater bowed his head and sat down. The Lord Chancellor frowned, nodded, and buried his head in the voluminous papers that he still held in his hand, his shoulders quaking in what may have been the prelude to a sob of frustration. "Now, Soho, let me ask you: did you love your wife?"

"Yes," I said. Then smiled, sadly. For I don't think that I had known, until that moment, just how much I had loved her. "She was a child. But not like you, madam. She was –"

The queen's eyes ignited. She banged a fist upon the armrest of her throne, leaned forward, and then almost as swiftly relaxed. "In my curiosity to hear you finish, I suppose I must overlook your impertinence. Continue, Lord Soho."

"I only meant that she had never been old, madam. And never, I think, could have become old, even if she had lived as long as us. She was an innocent. A true innocent. And if I sometimes thought her a shrew, it was only because every day I wronged her. She wanted to laugh. To play. To have fun. To be with her friends. She was the rose, the happy, lovely rose of all our dreams. But I locked her up in my big, cold house and expected her to be happy. Happy with toys and the company of an old fool! My flower began to wither –" Yes, she had been a child. My child. A child who could never be returned to me. The promise of that dream, when I had fallen through the

Earth, was false, as counterfeit as the land that England had become. "She was England," I said. "The last of England. I will never see her like again."

"Do you regret what you have done?" the queen said. Her voice was purged of laughter. And though she almost whispered, her words, brooking no competition – a hush had fallen upon the chamber – were clear as a child's for whom the world held its breath.

"I can conceive of doing no greater evil." I studied the saturnine faces of my fellow peers. One after another, they stared back, a carrion appetite lighting up their eyes, as they readied to scavenge for the last scrap of pain and humiliation that the disgraced Lord Soho might provide them. "When we were first married, I would take her to the top of the bell tower and she would ask me strange questions, such as whether there were animals on the moon, and whether Jesus and the Virgin Mary were man and wife. She would talk of her past, of a time when, sick and near death, she had gone to heaven and had never wished to return, for the angels, she said, were all children, like her, and sang to her with voices so beautiful that she had cried when her fever had at last broken. And I think, perhaps, in those rare moments, she did truly love me. But that was before I tried to make a lady out of her."

"And she turned to others for more human solace. So sad, Lord Soho," said the queen. "I'm almost sorry I laughed at you."

"Fear not, Your Majesty," said Bayswater, standing up once again. "This is one the *world* will come to laugh at. And surely for all time! But when we have finished with laughter, we must consider that this man has merely revealed his colours by murdering Lady Soho and his" – and the filthy old man with the appearance of a teenage boy could not resist availing himself of a derisive laugh – "or perhaps, let us say, *her* child."

The silence that had permeated the chamber evaporated. And Bayswater's guffaws were echoed by the house, a drone of scabrous pleasure that grew in volume and became a discordant hymn signalling that England's aristocracy was impatient to see the lord who had wed a street-girl brought to account, not for his crimes, and certainly not for his orc-blood – which, if truth were known, more than a few of my peers shared – but for being a gull, a fool, a dupe of the worst type, a creature they considered deserving of no compassion: a man so promiscuous of his better nature as to *trust*.

"Oh, fiddlesticks," said the queen. "I say we settle matters now. For all his fine words, the man's a toad. A slug. A cockroach. Seeing him at court has made me feel absolutely *sick*." She picked the sceptre from off her lap and levelled it so that its obsidian orb pointed at my chest. "It's death, Lord Soho. Death by hanging. And I don't care how much you regret doing your poor family in. But there is one thing you must answer me before I have them take you away. How on earth did you survive a fall of some 300 feet without so much as a broken pinky?"

"I don't know, madam," I said. "I don't know."



In concession to my exalted station, and the importance the Darkling Isle's autocracy placed on ceremonies of power and death, I was driven to Tyburn in a black, open-topped *Vipera*, the big limousine's running boards burdened with armed policemen to allay any thought the crowd might have of exacting a more summary justice, or – unlikely as it doubtless seemed to any but the most paranoid members of officialdom – to dissuade those misguided enough to attempt rescue.

I was allowed, or I should rather say, required to wear my robes and coronet. For the sake of greater ceremonial form. And to demonstrate, I think, to London's starved, discontented multitude, that if a queen and her lords would brook no dissent from on high, they would certainly have no compunction in crushing those so low as to be normally beneath their notice. But if I was a lord of the realm, and one happy to display the accoutrements of a proud if disturbed lineage, then I was also a black knight, and prouder, perhaps, of the renown the Order had won in the war, than of the deeds, manifold but sometimes dubious in the extreme, of the Lords Soho who had preceded me. And so under my robes I had put on my knightly uniform. One that identified me as a captain of the ancient and élite unit it had been my special pleasure to command.

As we wound through Holborn and into Oxford Street, several Soho denizens – some of whom I thought I recognized – forced themselves to the front of those that crowded the way and saluted me with a choice selection of obscenities. I put an index finger to my lordly little crown and tipped my head in their direction, conveying a wish that their own journeys to hell might be as speedy as my own. I was rewarded with a bombardment of tin cans, stones and faeces – the traditional rotten fruit reserved, these days, for the cooking pot, so effectively had the orcs tightened their siege. Something ricocheted off my coronet, setting it at a jaunty angle, which, turning to inspect myself in a wing mirror, I found agreed with my mood so much that I let it stay that way. The crowd, oblivious to the shouts of the policemen to either side of me that the hunchback was to die, not by stoning, but by hanging, and woe to anyone who thought otherwise, continued pelting me with muck. I lay back in the soft, black leather upholstery and stared up at the rooftops, picking ordure from my soiled white furs.

The city, I reflected, had changed much since I was a boy. Its elegant, spiralling buildings worked from the forests of living stone that the orcs had left behind more than 500 years ago, remained, recalling the days when the Darkling Isle had thought that those stones would be the enemy's sole legacy. But the old skyline had been scarred, and not just by the daily cannonades that reminded us that the orcs had returned and meant to stay, but by novel contraptions such as elevators, skywalks, blimps and aerials – symbols of modernity that proclaimed London's days of glory to be over, its renascence of learning buried in the shallowness and terror of the new.

I leaned over the side of the car. "Fools!" I cried to the mob. "My father liberated you! He pushed through the legislation that outlawed thraldom! But you are still

slaves, slaves to the cheap, unfeeling modern world, slaves who know it not!" My father had only achieved what my family had immemorially fought for, of course, because England's autocracy had known that platitudes, nationalism and an insatiable craving for material goods were a more successful yoke than the old system of free-man and thrall had ever been, if only because the chains that bound slave to master had become invisible. In this modern world of ours, we had all become slaves, herded to slaughter by the crass forces of history.

We reached Tyburn. I was allowed to exit the car without the indignity of being frogmarched, or even having someone so much as put an authoritative hand on my arm. And with similar decorum the constabulary who ringed the gallows parted to allow me to ascend to the place of reckoning alone. Putting my foot upon the first step, I cast a withering look over my shoulder, at pains to master myself by assuming the manner of a man who scorns the mean consolations of existence. Not a role so difficult for Richard Pike the Twelfth to assume, who had spent his life as an object of contempt, and had rounded it off by destroying the only creatures he loved, but a role, nevertheless, that recent events had proved was easier in theory than when one is actually called upon to tread the boards. I moved slowly upwards, one hand upon my jauntily aligned crown, the other sweeping the hem of my robes away from my feet, lest I break my neck prematurely.

I emerged onto the platform to be greeted by howls, catcalls, whistles, shrieks and a general cachinnation. I glanced at the hangman and the priest. Like those who had conveyed me here, they chose to keep their distance, the presence of one of the Darkling Isle's notoriously cruel aristocrats enough, it seemed, even in these revisionary times, to evoke a sense of the fearful social chasm that existed between us. I mustered my courage. Walked forward. And, with a somewhat ostentatious show of distaste, came to a halt standing upon the trap. No mischance would initiate the fall I must now suffer, I told myself. No freak accident would dictate the terms by which I would today face death. I smiled. It was a little, private smile of relief. And then, drawing my face into a look of vast condescension – the

final luxury a condemned lord may, perhaps, offer himself – I turned towards the hangman and nodded. Obligingly, he stepped forward, slipped the noose about my neck and proceeded to tighten its knot under my ear.

Curtly, I refused the hood. "I may speak a few last words, surely," I said. Visibly embarrassed, the hangman bowed and retreated to the scaffold's rail. Since my hands were still free, I lifted them in an expansive rhetorical gesture that took in all of Tyburn, London, England, indeed the world, my body as unconsciously eager, perhaps, of exercising its vitality as my mind was to expend its last energies in damning the mob.

"I say you are slaves still," I cried. The crowd ceased its clamour, and, except for isolated hissing, hung upon my words

like an astonished circus audience that watches a bizarrely appalled little clown walk to the centre of the ring only to expostulate boldly upon the rest of humanity's inadequacies. "For thousands of years your descendants lived outside London's walls. We called you the idiot people, fit only to wash our clothes, serve our meals and enliven our beds. And you loved us. Loved us almost as much as you loved your own slavery. So much had brainwashing – both ideological and chemical – effected a change in what was once called 'human nature.' But my ancestors redeemed you. Under their leadership, you renounced your servile ways, and took arms against the autocracy. At last, by the grace of my father, universal manumission was granted, in return for peace and the re-absorption of the rebel counties into London's fold. But what have you gained? Are you

really so different from those cur-like men and women who were so eager to prove themselves chattels? You believe yourselves free; even boast about it. But you have merely exchanged one bondage for another: a subtle, clandestine slavery that is the curse of our modern world and which has made slaves of us *all*."

I paused to take breath. "It is our slavery to the past that I talk of. The endless recycling of the past. To exhausted, reiterated, subverted human history. And to think we once dreamed that we might rebuild our world in the semblance of the Ancients! Impossible! For we are without a compass. Unable to determine past from present, present from future. That has been the price of our



machine age. If you are no longer an idiot people, then I say you are a machine people. Slaves of a world without a centre, a world that will soon disintegrate under the force of its own contradictions. And slaves that you are, you find the truth inadmissible: that you, like the world you inhabit, are without souls, without substance. That you are still here, in Time, means simply that the struggle between an illusory vitality and the fact that you are foredoomed has not yet resolved itself."

Throughout my rant the mob remained quiescent. But as soon as I had let my arms fall to my sides and sealed my lips – for I had determined not to waste further breath upon this contemptible world – they stirred, pricked to fury. Their former boos, hisses and lonely shouts of guttural invective gave way to a huge roar of outrage and protest. And if the hangman had, until then, shown diffidence towards me, it was nothing compared to the nervousness that the mob now inspired. Forgetting rank and station in his hurry to do the general will, he fairly skipped over to the lever that would open the trap and prepared to satisfy those whose full-throated, if inarticulate, critique of my little speech indicated that a riot was in the offing.

Hurriedly, the priest read from his Bible. Those of the crowd nearest to me redoubled their cries, desperate, it seemed, that I should learn their vile opinions concerning my less than Adonis-like demeanour before my ears were stopped up by death. I gazed down at them and bared my teeth. And as they gasped at this brazen display of the Pike family curse, I reflected upon that other emblem of perversity, the sword of my ancestors that I had dreamed of and which, at this moment of truth, seemed to stir within me, like a memory made flesh.

The hangman grasped the fatal lever. I threw back my head and closed my eyes. "*Espirito Santo*," I muttered, and grinned, wondering in the few seconds I had left of mortal existence why I had ever had such a strange dream, and why, more to the point, it seemed fit to recur just as I was about to fall once again, this time into a more imperishable darkness. And then, as time seemed to slow, I repeated the sword's name, the words eliding into a lusty holler, "*Espirito Santo!*" The crowd, but for isolated whispers, was once more stilled.

"He calls upon the perverse!"

"Upon his gods!"

"Upon the people of the Dark Ages!"

"He calls upon the spirits of the dead!"

I descried an argent splinter cross the back of my eyelid, thrown into relief against the membrane's blaze of luminous blood by virtue of its greater brilliance. I tilted my chin, opened my eyes and instantly screwed them into painful slits, positioning myself so that I might bring the invading object into focus. Wheeling out of the sun, like a fragment of eternity, a glittering abstraction that recalled divine messengers such as described by the prophets of the Old Testament, came a sword. Silent at first, but soon to make a cool, rhythmic susurration as it scythed through the air, nearer and nearer, the blade at last revealed itself, and in so doing, revealed my destiny. The trap opened. I fell.

My robes billowed. Like a drowning man who cannot

help but submit, I sucked in two lungfuls of fetid air, wholly expecting to be smothered in the universe's oceanic darkness. But my lungs were to empty themselves not in terror, but in exultation. When the ground had disappeared beneath me, I had been staring upwards, frozen in the act of observing the comet-like appearance of the sword. Falling through space, in what should have been the last moments of my life, I still stared upwards. Thus it was I saw *Espirito Santo* cross the square of sky framed by the open trap and sever the hemp rope just before my plummeting body could draw it taut. And I fell, not into oblivion, but onto the cobbles. The rope snaked itself across my spreadeagled body. There was a moment of acute inner chaos, shot through with the conviction that my neck was intact. I rolled over, tore at the noose, pulled it over my head and then discarded it. I shivered. Felt, and then checked, a sudden desire to gag. Instinctively, I held up an arm; opened a hand. There was a flash of steel, and my fingers curled about an ebony hilt, exploring its contours with the familiarity of an old lover. A weight, a fullness of being, transposed itself to my mid-section, and then into my soul. The displaced centre of gravity that had hounded me all my floundering, half-capsized life, suddenly righted, like life itself. I stood, and my confusion went, finding a more suitable host in the awed constabulary that surrounded me.

I made a few sweeps and passes through the air. The sword, though eager, it seemed, to communicate to my depths that it was possessed of an otherworldly massiveness, was paradoxically light to the touch. I shook my head. Laughed. My mind was clearer than at any time I cared to remember. The knowledge that I lived and that the sword was no dream, neither now nor when my spirit had passed through the forgotten passageways beneath my house, was like a light – a light that burned away the shadows that had clouded my thoughts and affirmed, in the white heat of recognition, that *Espirito Santo* and I truly were one, and that I could do anything, anything.

Goaded on by the hangman, whose upside-down face peered at me over the lip of the scaffold, the two men who had been assigned to pull on my swinging legs should the drop have proved ineffectual closed in. Their assault was less than enthusiastic, and I slew them both with three nonchalant swipes, my robes swirling as I pranced across the straw-covered ground like an imp on an invisible pogo stick. Across my first victim's torso I swiftly carved, this way, and then that, a saltire – the only armorial emblem that that wretched pleb would ever own – and despatched the second somewhat less quixotically with an upsweep that opened him up from groin to chops.

A vast power coursed down my right arm. And when the same power filled my legs, I felt impelled to do something more than hop about as if on a child's toy – something that it was useless to query, or even to resist, anointed as I was with such a surfeit of preternatural energy that, if it were not to find expression, would surely kill me.

I raised my head and stared up at the hangman. The next moment I was leaping six, eight, twelve feet into the air. The sword leapt too, almost leaving my hand in its feverish haste to score old Jack Ketch through his hooded

eye. The deed done, I dropped towards the ground. The blade came away. The hangman's scandalized visage receded. And as it did, his hands twitched, groping at vacancy, one of them finally clasping the offended socket, blood and brain oozing through the gauntleted fingers as he tried to discover, perhaps, why the world had turned red. Then, rising up onto his knees, he fell forward into space, impacting a second after myself. I jumped up and stood over him.

"Roo-too-to-rooey!"

A spectator to my own actions, as pathologically removed from humanity's concerns as the angels above, I gave him a cursory kick in the head and heard myself cackle something about how his dismount needed more work.

"Shoot him!" yelled one of the special policemen who had forced his way through the scrum of more cautious officers who encircled the scaffold. "The man's a cripple! A damn midget! Shoot him for the dog he is!"

Following his example, a handful of trench-coated special police shouldered their way through the perimeter, stepped over the bodies of the executioner's hapless assistants, dipped their hands beneath their lapels and pulled out their revolvers, forming an inner circle about me that mirrored that of their more hesitant colleagues, but which would, I knew, prove inflexible to anything but the most fabulous displays of violence.

"A cripple?" I said, the eyeball that had decorated the tip of my blood-slicked rapier sent flying through the air with a single flick of my wrist. "Perhaps. But have you heard of the first Richard Pike, the noted orc-slayer, and my distant forebear?" They pursed their lips and looked at each other askance, these big, brave boys choosing to conceal their apprehension somewhat unsuccessfully. "He was famous for his unparalleled cut and thrust, the elegance of his parry, the noble élan of his eviscerating slash, and, of course, not least, his contemptuous jab to the genitalia." One of the offices gave a brief, expectorant laugh. "His spirit is my spirit, his sword my sword!" And then I laughed too, and so much more unpleasantly that the circle of policemen collectively took a step backwards.

I went in low, my rolling gait no longer that of a hunchback, but of a man whose resemblance to one of the lesser, but more verminous creatures of the field, lent him an advantage over his regularly apportioned fellows – the ability to hop, leap, jink and scurry like a rat or toad. The laughter increased – the spectacle I presented was, I suppose, somewhat curious – then abruptly stopped as, swinging the sword downwards, I relieved the man nearest me, not merely of his revolver, but the hand that had gripped it, too, leaving him staring at a bloodied shirt cuff as if about to angrily reproach his truant limb. And as *Espritu Santo* demanded more blood, I was as good as my boast, cutting, thrusting, swaggering, eviscerating, and treating the last man standing to an impromptu castration, before any of my assailants had the chance to discharge their weapons.

I strode out from beneath the shadow of the gallows and all fell back before me, the derisive hoots of the crowd now turned to spunkless, if prudent, applause. But

I had no time to acknowledge the accolade – a customary one, I would guess, for any adventurer with the distinction of putting Jack Ketch beneath the ground along with a good selection of his cohorts; whatever magnitude of energy and skills I had been invested with, I knew I had to escape, or myself die.

The crowd parted. I spotted the *Vipera*. Growling, and showing off my rows of gleaming incisors, I ran towards the car, the sword held before me in warning. My gait displayed the loping characteristics that had made me a mockery to my fellow men, but which, informed by the sword's transformative power, had become a fighting style that, if I should exploit it to its full, I was sure could put not only Jack Ketch but the whole world in its grave. And sensing that power, all drew back, hands held before their faces with the dread that men usually feel when confronted by the most august of omens or miracles. The passenger door was open. I threw myself across the leather seat. Shouted at the driver to get out, hitting him smartly across the thighs with the flat of the blade to speed him on his way. Quickly, I slammed the door behind me, switched on the ignition, put the big car into gear and stamped on the accelerator, the plebeian horde scattering across Tyburn as I thundered through their midst.



I drove through the ruins of Bethnal Green. Streets where malnutrition and constant bombardment had sown an apathy that I knew could only assist my escape. As I travelled further east, negotiating a maze of ruptured sewers, burnt-out tenements and piles of rubble, the streets became deserted, and apathy, if still prevalent as a kind of intangible miasma, no longer wore a human face.

Here, in the outer reaches of the East End, a strange deracination had occurred. The newspapers had carried reports of a newly diagnosed form of fugue, where people living beneath the shadows of the city walls had not so much forgotten who they were as become convinced that they were ghosts. Wandering from home, sometimes far, far into the wastes, they headed for another, less substantial world. My own flight from reality took me deep into this spectral land. For though I reminded myself I was no ghost, I knew I might well become one if I did not flee London and get back to the lines post-haste.

When I reached Dagenham the vast perpendicular of the wall became clearly visible over the rows of exposed, blackened rafters that constituted the skyline. Many centuries ago the wall's stones had been supplemented with titanic blocks hewn from the forests that the Netherworld had sown on Earth-Above during its many raids and incursions. And that stone, alive in a manner incomprehensible even to modern-day science, had extended the wall to a height comparable to that of Castle Soho. The stone had died, like the forests themselves, but in death, instead of rejuvenating into something terrible and strange, like the metamorphosed woodlands surrounding London, had been subsumed into the wall's original masonry, with only a corbel that had the aspect

of a branch, or an embrasure that seemed, at first glance, a gigantic bole, to suggest the nature, the dark, unnatural nature, that predicated our defences.

I put my foot down, heading towards a section of the wall that I knew, from the inspection tours I had carried out prior to submitting my most recent recommendations to the high command, was guarded by my fellow black knights. Men who, seeing my uniform and rank, and remembering my previous visits, would be unlikely to quiz me on where I had come from or where I was going, but simply open the gates and allow me through.

And so it was. I screeched to a halt; looked up to the grilled window that overlooked the approach road and barked out an order. The guard looked down, awarding me a perfunctory salute. The big gates creaked open. I was waved on. The car nosed under the great arch, through a longish tunnel – I never failed to wonder at the percipience of those of our forebears who, ignorant of the power of artillery, had yet provided future generations with such substantial fortifications – and then, emerging into the desolate countryside that lay beyond, accelerated away as I pushed the *Vipera* to its limits.

The plain was so flat that the wall remained visible in the rear-view mirror long after I had clocked up several miles: a strip of black anonymous stone demarcating the spires and finials that lay beyond its compass from the frozen mud that flashed by and extended as far as the eye could see. I concentrated on the road ahead. Even though it was near midday, the horizon still possessed its idiosyncratic red glow, which at night filled the sky above the front line with what seemed luminous, blood-drenched thunderclouds. Like most soldiers, my men were superstitious, and the sight regularly exacerbated their unhealthy proclivities to believe that it was the spilling of their own blood that was being foretold. It did not seem to matter how much I might assure them that the aurora was man-made, the result of the military-industrial complex I had been instrumental in creating and which, far from prophesying doom, was a cause for hope, even celebration; did not matter how much I emphasized that it was only with the aid of vastly improved materiel that we could even begin to think about bringing the war to an unconditional end. They knew they were to die. And would not be convinced otherwise.

Ruins began to dot the plain, the remains of villages, manor houses and farms. Before long, I began to pass through the outskirts of military encampments. The noise of artillery had become insistent, rumbling like a distant electrical storm. I braked, forced to slow down by a long column of troops. They hobbled along either side of the road, covered in filth and so dazed that any one of them might well have fallen under the *Vipera*'s front wheels if I had not exercised due caution.

The column thickened to such an extent that it became impassable without recourse to vehicular manslaughter. I steered the car to the side of the road and got out, sliding *Espíritu Santo* between my belt and hip and then covering it beneath the folds of my robes. I knew where I was. A little way off, the great chimneys and flues that rose from factories deep beneath the Earth – factories we

had taken from the orcs after pushing back their initial advance a quarter of a century ago, and which were now dedicated to manufacturing the most terrible weapons the mind of man could devise – spewed out their characteristic emissions and tainted the sky. Resignedly, I began to shuffle through the oncoming human traffic, each soldier I pushed aside impassive, uncomplaining, as if to be treated thus by a little bantam cock in masquerade costume was something so common as to pass notice.

But if these war-weary troops displayed the same apathy that I had encountered in London's East End, I would soon, and soon enough, come upon those in whom I might expect to provoke suspicion. The tale of my escape from the noose would spread. And none, who had not recently had their senses derailed by any one of the numerous disasters of war, could fail to form a mental association between the diminutive man in ermine robes and coronet who passed through their midst and reports of the base deeds of Richard Pike, Lord Soho.

My only hope, I knew, was to find Melchezidek.



My batman entered the dugout. In his arms he carried my robes and coronet. My robes had been laundered. My coronet polished to a tee.

"Are you sure you wish to wear these garments, sir? I would hazard they are somewhat *cumbersome* for the battlefield."

I looked up from the maps that I had spread out over the table. "I'm sure they are." I stood and turned to the pier glass. Like my ceremonial robes, the uniform I wore was scrupulously clean. The leather doublet had been buffed to a fine gloss, so too the leather hose, riding boots, thick studded belt and matching codpiece. A scabbard, of similarly refined pedigree, was buckled to my side, the hilt of *Espíritu Santo* protruding from its calfskin mouth. I held out my arms, indicating that I wished to be dressed. "But cumbersome or not, they are what my family has coveted for many generations. I am determined to die a lord."

"A somewhat morbid sentiment, is it not sir, if I may be so bold?"

"It would be pointless, I think, to deny that I have a morbid temperament. I am, after all, a Pike."

"And your father would be proud of you, sir. Your grandfather, too."

"My grandfather? A monumental pervert, I've heard. Died out East, they say. My father? Well, I hardly knew him. His life was spent consolidating the return of the family's property, title and power."

"You'll recall that I knew your father, sir. And I can tell you: he was a Pike through and through."

The ermine settled upon my shoulders. I drew the fur greedily about me. It was cold. A sleet ing rain had, that morning, come in from the north. My batman stooped – there was a quite audible *crack* – and placed the coronet upon my head. The sound of his protesting bones reminded me of his great age. Like most of the population, he had never rejuvenated; yet, despite being an old

friend of the family whom I had known for over one hundred years, I could not remember him ever having changed. Outwardly, he was lean as a pipe-cleaner and straight as a board, if as ugly, or perhaps even uglier, than his master.

"You have been with my family a long time, Melchezidek. I feel you have known us *all* through and through."

Just as you have aided us, I might have added, in times of peril. When I had fled London some three weeks ago, it had been he who, hearing of my escape, and that a warrant had already been telegraphed down the lines for my re-arrest, had tracked me down and taken me into hiding. Then, surprising me as much by his brazenness as by hitherto concealed, if very real diplomatic skills, he had approached the high command and explained to them exactly why the demands of civil law would have to give way to the more practical considerations of the battlefield. *"It is not merely that Captain Pike wishes to die like a soldier,"* he had said, *"but that he is one of the few officers familiar with the technical details of the projected Big Push. One of the few who has championed the principles of mechanized warfare, the budget for which, I need not remind you, he successfully pressed for in parliament, confounding those obfuscating scoundrels who roundly condemned the army's desire to research weapons of mass destruction. General, you simply cannot afford to lose Captain Pike."*

Melchezidek's ploy had proved successful. Something I found all the more surprising given that my batman had more orc blood in him than I, and presented an aspect, grey, wrinkled and horny, that was unlikely to instil confidence in a less genetically compromised human soul.

I inspected myself in the mirror, striving to look past the hooked nose, pot-belly and crooked back that constituted my own share of repulsiveness, and see into the self that had been revealed to me when I had lain unconscious at the foot of my ancestral home. The part of me that was *Espirito Santo*.

"But the question is, Melchezidek, how well do you know the sword?"

"I always knew it would return to your family's keeping, sir. Just as surely as I knew that you would return to the front."

"And what I have told you of all that I experienced when I fell from the top of Castle Soho, and for some reason survived, only to dream that I walked beneath the Earth: do you know enough to explain *that*?"

He cleared his throat and turned away, his face towards the retaining wall. Taking a step forward, he ran his hands over some of the shelves I had had erected, like an over-conscientious butler testing for dust. I had gone to some pains to make sure the dugout contained a few paltry reminders of home: a broken porcelain doll; an old cut-throat razor with a mother-of-pearl handle lying against a basin; a swordstick; the caste of an elephantine penis; a book of verse. And in addition to these oddments were contemporary and more impersonal artefacts that, like those reminders of my family's strange past, were

reinterpretations, or perversions, of history. Vinyl recordings of *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Turandot*; a gilt-framed movie poster of the beautiful starlet, Veda Pierce, the spoilt brat *par excellence*; postcards of Boucher, Fragonard, Watteau, and the autobiography of Giovanni Jacopo Casanova de Seingalt and the diaries of the Goncourts. But of late these things, in their bittersweet summations of my former life, gave no comfort but only emphasized the impossible distance I must travel if I were ever to see their like again.

"Might it be true?" I said, quietly, addressing the back of my batman's head. "The promise the sword made: might it really be possible to undo my crimes and bring Joan and Richard back to life?"

He cleared his throat. "All I know, sir, is that I've been waiting. I do not quite know why. The waiting has been as mysterious as my natural longevity. Yes, all I know is that you are the last of your kind, the man who must bring his race's fabulous iterations to an end. The coda, if you will, of an age. But as for more than that – I am only a man, sir. Or rather a half-man. A witch. Not even a player, but someone who has spent most of his time in the wings. What more can I tell you?"

I hesitated. The cold seemed to have solidified the air, so that I felt like a fly trapped in a piece of refrigerated amber. In subjective terms, my life processes had slowed to such an extent that my thoughts – racing forward, as they were, to find some conclusion – belonged to a world where men were born, weaned, brought to boyhood, manhood and then the grave, in a single day. This day. This day, I thought, that promised to settle all. "Am I and the sword one?" Each word chipped at the frozen stillness like a verbal ice pick.

The stillness fractured. "If I am a half-man, sir," he replied, "believe me when I say with all respect that you have never been a man at all. Not that there are true men any more. All of us are infected with the perversions of mind and body that have riddled the centuries. It is just that you, sir – you are not of this universe. When the first Richard Pike asked me, shortly before he died, to bring his son home to the Darkling Isle, he told me of something that had happened to him, deep, deep below the Earth's surface. And he begged me, sir, to ensure that a similar fate would not befall his boy. That is why, when the second Richard Pike acquired the Soho title, I buried the sword beneath his house, hoping that, in time, the curse would be lifted. That is, that the spirit which had invested the sword, and subsequently, its master's soul, would be exorcised, and preside only over the Earth's nether regions, where it belonged. But during the course of the centuries, my hopes have been dashed. And I have come to realize that the curse may be lifted only one way."

"It's all as I've been told," I said, feeling something that was composed of dread and hope in equal measure oscillate through me like a radio wave from the beyond. "Say no more."

I strode forward, pulled aside the canvas flap of the dugout and, leaving Melchezidek behind, stepped out to confront a clear blue sky. The sleet had gone, and though it was still bitterly cold the wind had abated. I knew,

then, that this day, so meteorologically bland, would, in some as yet indefinable way, indeed prove wondrous.

I traversed the duckboards in a westerly direction passing row upon row of whey-faced troops who had been called up from the rear. Rats and frogs scuttled before me. NCOs shouted "Stand-to, stand-to!" At last, I came to where my company of hardened warriors hunkered, ready to go over the top. They were all black knights. It affected me more than I can tell to see their ready salutes and smiles. Within London's walls, I had always been despised, a fitting subject for children's taunts. But here, where life and death were so interchangeable, to the extent that one did not know, sometimes, whether one was a living man or a ghost, I had won through various exploits on the field a certain respect, perhaps even a modicum of renown. It was right that I died here and not upon the gallows. It was the only honour I was liable to salvage from an otherwise dishonourable life.

I came to a halt; nodded to my sergeant. Down the line, men loaded their rifles, fixed bayonets and crossed themselves, waiting for the order.

I crawled up the entrenchment. My sergeant handed me a periscope. I propped it up on the leading edge of the corrugated steel that reinforced the earth and peered into the eyepiece.

Smoke billowed about the enemy positions then cleared a little, and I saw that their wire had been broken. Great craters pocked the steaming earth. I waited, scanning no-man's-land for signs of activity. I could see no movement. All was as still as the frozen air. No snipers. No scouts. Indeed, nothing to indicate that the orcs in the trenches that were the counterpart to our own were still alive. They were, of course. Experience had proved that they always were, no matter how heavy a pounding they took. That is why, today, our basic strategy was to change. The weapon that I had had London's scientists working on for the last six months was designed to break the stalemate once and for all. It was a weapon that my critics said had been adumbrated, not by theorems, formulae and hypotheses, but by the ancient world's fables, arguing that the resources I had allocated to research and development represented a vast waste of money and time, and that moreover, thing of fable that it was, it would never work. My more thoughtful critics, amongst whom I numbered Lord Bayswater, had argued the contrary: that the weapon had real historical antecedents, and that my attempts to remake it from the mathematically dubious recipes of grimoires and incunabula, would end, not in red faces all round, but in catastrophe. I myself well understood the risk. But I had seen too many young men throw away their lives for a few feet of bloodstained mud. No catastrophe could ever compare to the one we presently suffered.

I waited for the sound of the aeroplane. And as I waited, anxious that some unforeseen contingency had prevented it from taking off, the winter sun rose sufficiently to reveal the outlying hills. I adjusted the periscope's magnification to take in the familiar yet always awe-inspiring spectacle of the Nephilim.

How beautiful they were, those sentinel-like beings who

held us in a kind of second siege. No matter that, like my batman, they were committed to a waiting game, and surprised us only by their unwavering patience. I focused on the golden body of what could equally have been a man or a woman suspended in a gelatinous sac between two great trees, glistening in the rays of the pendent sun.

The tree line that had, centuries before, been composed of living stone, and then, dying into petrifaction, been reborn as a great forest of flesh, presented a frontier between heaven and earth, the angelic and the fallen. The golden beings strung along its length, some said, promised to reconcile high and low, good and evil, and, yes, perhaps even beauty and ugliness. They were angel-demons. And they waited for us to depart as much as for the hour of their own nativity. The bodies within the folds and twists of the pink corpus of leaf and bough – their flesh either merging with or standing out from the surrounding, fleshly vegetation – left no doubt that the forest served as a womb.

We had long known the forests were pregnant with strange, new life. A life that we all suspected presaged our own end. Known with such clairvoyance that many had tried, unsuccessfully, to extirpate the chimeras and other, more powerful, spontaneously generated creatures that incubated in England's hills and dales. The black knights themselves had been to the forefront of such exercises. But the forests were dangerous. The life that slept there would sometimes wake, to deadly effect. And as the forests had grown, eventually to cover all of England, human life – or rather, what remained of human life – had retreated to its last line of defence: London. Were the Nephilim the reason that I did not feel more than a numb despair for the loss of my wife and child? Why I did not rage, or cry with unanswerable sorrow? Perhaps. For it was not only a family I had lost, but a world. Whatever might happen today, the Nephilim would be the long-term victors.

I set the periscope down. In the distance, I heard the drone of a biplane. My men gazed up at the sky, expectantly. I took the whistle from the chain about my neck and put it between my lips. And then I pulled out my half-hunter. As the minute hand touched the hour, it chimed, a gay, tinny sound so lacking in gravitas that I almost expected it to be followed by a second, more deathly, knell that would upbraid it for its frivolousness. And I could not help but think that, though this might be the hour of our deliverance, it might also herald a time when watches would have no purpose, a time when human time would come to an end.

With a great roar, whose approach had been partly disguised by the drone of the plane, the armoured transports that would precede our advance trundled over our trenches, their hulls, bristling with long, steel spikes, lending them the appearance of mechanical porcupines, or weird engines of excruciation that might have enjoyed currency in the Dark Ages.

I blew a long blast on the whistle.

Then, drawing my heavy service revolver, and struggling up the rough, wooden steps, I was over the top, gun cocked and pointed forwards, walking as steadily as I

could, and making for the gap in our wire.

I passed through; glanced backwards. My company were at my heels, rifles at the ready, a line that would, I knew, if the bomb should prove a squib, soon have to cope with the Netherworld's machine guns, the doom of so many of London's young men. I called to them to adopt my own pace, and not allow themselves to be panicked by the silence and the memories of comrades who had gone before. But their attention was wholly upon the skies as the signature of the plane grew closer. In the end, unable to resist the temptation, I too wrested my gaze from the wire that, several hundred yards ahead, paralleled our own, and looked up to scan the faultlessly blue sky.

I spotted the plane at the same time as my men, and as they broke into a unified cheer, I fought to make myself heard, with cries of "Steady" and "Eyes on the job, lads," lost to the general hubbub of joy and apprehension.

The plane was soon directly over the enemy lines. Then, as it continued on its journey towards the hell-mouth that lay beyond, it began to climb in preparation for releasing its payload: the great, iron casket that, even at the extreme altitude the plane strove to attain, was clearly, and forebodingly, visible.

As the drone of the plane's engines disappeared into the azure silence, and the plane itself shrank to little more than a dot, puffs of smoke could be descried below its silver fuselage, as the big batteries that ringed the hell-mouth opened up. And, as if eager to compensate for the impotence of the flak, and the silence that extended from sky to earth, the *pop-pop-pop* of machine guns immediately followed.

I shouted. Told my company to regroup behind one of the ironclads. Then I transferred my revolver to my left hand and used my right to draw *Espirito Santo*. We had covered a considerable amount of ground. But things were going wrong. As they always did. The leisurely walk across no-man's-land promised by the high command had been annulled by the plane's late arrival. However near or distant the enemy trenches might prove, I knew that we could not wait for the bomb to drop, or rely on the doubtful inviolability of the sluggish transport; we must charge now, if any of us were to survive. Or survive long enough, at least, to die like soldiers, amid the screams and lamentations of the enemy. Momentum was all.

Breaking cover, I raised the sword above my head, increased my stride and then broke into a trot. And those about me still on their feet followed.

I took one last look over my shoulder. We had left the ironclads behind. The main body of infantry, an army of some 50,000 men, was in our wake, braving the hail of bullets with grim, boyish obstinacy, unable to quite believe, perhaps, that the innumerable corpses that already strewed the battlefield foreshadowed their own almost certain demise. I dare say I in part shared their disbelief, for I could not otherwise have so blithely led the vanguard of black knights into the chattering guns. The man next to me spun about, his tin helmet sailing through the air, and then, falling to one side, disappeared into a shell crater. I whirled *Espirito Santo* above my head and broke into a sprint, leaping into the air as each

enemy bullet pinged off a boulder or thudded into the earth, my ermine trailing behind me, my coronet bouncing up and down, and my heart ready to burst.

Ahead, amidst the muzzle flash and smoke, I saw that I approached one of the spots I had earlier reconnoitred: a length of ground where the enemy's wire had been broken. If we could only remain alive long enough, I thought, with a keen and dreadful thrill, we stood a real chance of storming their positions.

Of those black knights who clove to my ankles, a cluster of mines despatched at least half a dozen. For a moment, I stopped, inspected the bloody remains that lay about me, then made a brief, wary survey of myself. To my astonishment, I had not even been scratched. Angry, with an anger that banished all fear, and deaf to everything but the ringing inside my head, I pressed home the attack, crying out to those of my comrades who still stumbled in my shadow to join me.

I could see the orcs clearly now, their horned visages poking above an entrenchment. "*Espirito Santo!*" I yelled. Their red eyes opened wide, then wider, as they came to a full understanding of our resolve. Taking heart, I urged my men on towards the perimeter of the wire; snaked through its rent network of rusted barbs; and suddenly found myself at the enemy's threshold. If their fire had become uncoordinated, it would, I knew, prove accurate and deadly enough at close quarters. But recalling the importance of sustaining the assault's momentum, and knowing that my duty was to lead, I jumped into the trench regardless. And was instantly surrounded by creatures with scaly flesh, forked tails, bat-like wings and talons. Demons such as were any Christian man's nightmare. Devils eager to usher me into their hell.

I emptied my revolver, killing three. Then, feeling my sword-arm come to life, I threw the sidearm disdainfully aside and brought *Espirito Santo* down upon the crown of the Netherworld soldier unlucky enough to have been bringing up his comrades' rear. The blade cleft his skull, spattering his brains onto the duckboards. The dark energy that filled my every nerve, muscle and sinew was so inordinate that I needed recourse to an ear-splitting scream to allay the pressure that I felt building up within me.

I danced, pranced, hopped, skipped and somersaulted. And all the while I performed my manic routine I chopped and hewed at the enemy. Very soon, I had no one left to fight, and was forced to pursue the one terrified orc still on his feet along the length of the trench before at last despatching him with a carefully chosen sword stroke.

I was alone, bereft as much of friend as of foe. I had been so consumed with killing everything within reach that I had been unaware that the mass of infantry, including my own black knights, had already swept across the front line to advance into the hinterland.

The point at which I stood had at some time received a direct hit from a shell. With no steps to be had, and with the usual reinforcements blasted away, I was forced to slither up the side of the trench on my belly, friable earth coming away in hands that, until then, I had not noticed to be so drenched in blood. As my head emerged over the top, my gaze happened to fall upon a part of the sky punc-

tuated by a glittering point of light. One that, as I watched, gave birth to a second light that fell away from it, and that I knew to be my very own *enfant terrible*.

"Goggles!" I cried. But the noise of battle would have drowned out the order even if my men had not been so far away. I groped under my robes and quickly strapped on the eyewear that had been issued by the research-and-development people. The field turned murky as the smoked lenses filtered out the light – light that, very soon, I knew, would be intensified a thousandfold.

I got to my feet. The bomb was still falling lazily towards the hell-mouth. Forgetting the slaughter that transpired some one hundred yards in front of me, I studied its progress, transfixed by its minute, eschatological perfection. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spied an orc emerging from beneath a pile of bodies. Disorientated, he rose and looked blearily about, and then, at last noticing my presence, held up his hands and stumbled forward to offer his surrender. With one eye still on the falling star of ultimate destruction that had almost reached the ground, I made a half-hearted lunge, skewering the creature through his solar plexus. And in the time it took my lips to form the dismissive sneer preparatory to awarding the interloper a forceful and particularly imaginative curse for proving such an unnecessary distraction, all disappeared behind a sheet of indescribable brilliance. Like a curtain descending upon a mad, extempore piece of modern theatre, it signalled that the initial act of our drama had drawn to a close, and that after this blinding interval a dénouement would follow that, for the first time in 25 years, might involve us driving the enemy back into its subterranean lairs.

With a whoop of triumph, I threw myself onto my face, next to the orc who, it seemed, had expired without need of my sword's further attentions. The flash began to dissipate. Wraith-like forms – of my comrades, the wire and a few disabled ironclads – delineated themselves from out of the epidemic of bedazzlement. Then I despaired the desolate skyline, what remained of the refulgence now sucked back to its place of origin, so that the great plume of black smoke that rose out of the hell-mouth and into the blue – a blue fused with purple, so that the entire sky appeared like a vast, sickly bruise – was like a great, pale lantern, the war-tossed plain's sole remaining source of light. Darkness covered all else, the noonday battlefield eclipsed by a dense, louring cloud that soon stretched from one horizon to the other.

I tore off the goggles and managed to stand. Some way ahead of me the bulk of my men were clawing at their eyes and screaming. Those who – less consumed with the lust of battle – had had the forethought to don their protective glasses continued their advance, if somewhat unsteadily.

But then came the wind. The wind they had told us of, and, with the wind, the scorching heat. Briefed as to what I might expect, I still stared, uncomprehending, at the sight of men and orcs as they changed from solids to liquids to gases even as they re-engaged each other in combat; still thought that I might dream. But dreams, of late, had proved so conterminous with reality, that I could not long doubt the evidence of my senses. I

watched, knowing that this truly was the end, as skin and scale peeled away from man-bone and orc-bone, and then the bones themselves superheated, so that, for a few beats of my lurching heart, the battlefield seemed alive with dancing, luminous skeletons, before assuming the appearance of a vast charnel house recently fire-bombed by some cosmic vandal.

Looking down at myself I decided that I too was having a cosmically bad day. I was no more than a scarecrow, a twisted, crooked template of "humanity" festooned with strips of steaming flesh, with only the ermine that still clung to my shoulders suggesting that this *memento mori* had ever been Richard Pike, the fourth Lord Soho.

Yet I lived; impossibly lived.

I stood; scanned the four corners of the blackened plain and its unvarying prospect of devastation. The bomb had performed, alas, beyond my expectations. I made a little mental bow to some of my more intelligent critics, then, for want of knowing what else to do, gazed at the ground. My flesh dripped like hot fat onto the hardened earth. Bones followed, forming a pile, so that they came to resemble the remains of a wrecked xylophone. And yet, I told myself, I lived. Stood. Thought. Felt.

I studied my left hand. As the last piece of burnt, tattered skin fell away, and the underlying bones joined those already heaped in a funeral mound about my disintegrating feet, and as all, finally, evaporated and was cast to perdition by the vestiges of the atomic wind, I saw that I had acquired another hand. One bright. Perfect. Immutable.

I ran that hand over my naked torso, and then my face. And though I had no mirror in which to inspect myself, I could tell, by that cursory appraisal of my rebirth, that I enjoyed the proportions of a young god. A god whose images I had seen in museums. A god betokening ancient harmonies and eternal truths. But I could tell, too, that something about the symmetry of my form was alien, truly alien, and that the truths that it embodied, eternal as they were, were as much antithetical to the world of the ancients as they were to my own time.

"Time?" echoed a voice inside my skull. "That is what we have come here to rectify."

How foolish, it seemed now, to dwell upon the *raison d'être* of this war. Of the orcs. And that I had ever placed so much store in defeating them. For the first time, I knew who I was. Not a lord, not a Pike, not even a man who had the blood of the Netherworld in his veins, nor any of those false fellows prefigured by my ancestors.

I held the sword above my head so that its tip was pointed at the fractured skies. I cried out its name –

My name.

And then I segued, once and for all, into dreamtime. The sword hoisted me aloft. Higher, higher into the combusting atmosphere I went, the land below shrouded in the smoke that drifted from the hell-mouth. I flew towards the hills, *Espíritu Santo* cleaving the hot soup of burning oxygen to leave a flaming slipstream arcing from the wastes to the spawning ground of the Nephilim.

I landed at the edge of the vertiginously deep and, as some would have it, bottomless pit out of which the orcs had sprung to renew their struggle with humankind. It

was huge. Some one mile in diameter. And it led directly to Pandemonium, the capital city of the goblin race that lay at the centre of the Earth. The city I, Richard Pike, had utterly destroyed.

Before me, a great sweep of upland rose from the plain, ridged with that comb of fleshly foliage that divided earth from heaven, this world from the next. The forest seemed to tremble. Smoke billowed about its roots and threaded the red and pink branches. It was on fire. Not in the manner of the hell-mouth and the plain; its fire was a holy fire, a fire that called to the inferno of my own soul. Great tongues of spiritual essence licked and played through the interstices of bough and branch, at last to encircle the golden forms that they embowered.

The sword was raised above my head, no longer a blade wrought by mortal hands, but a tongue of brilliant, alien flame. It spoke. And I cried out an antiphonal response, our two voices becoming as one. *"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* The forest erupted into a great arbour of incandescence. And its cry joined with the cry of the Pikes, the cry of *Espiritu Santo*, becoming a hymn, a chorale announcing humanity's dispossession.

Pods cracked; colossal bodies disentangled themselves of vegetation – trees, shrubs, flowers, fungus and lichen burning away, like a veil soaked in petroleum and put to the match, to reveal the living temple of the Nephilim, the Form that had yet been only foreshadowed by the Flesh.

A race of giants – men and women golden of aspect and possessed of terrifying beauty; beings who were both good and evil and who reconciled the contradictions of humanity's chaotic past – stood naked and alone upon a ridge from which all trace of the nurturing forest had vanished. Slowly, they began to walk down the hillsides, towards the plain and the detritus that was all that was left of the human race. And with them they brought their fire – a fire very different from that which had destroyed my physical body. A fire with a calorific value not of this world. And growing more intense by the second, it began to eat into the too briefly enjoyed symmetry of my perfected, human form...

I collapsed, rolling towards the hell-mouth's crumbling edge, to come to a halt pillow'd by a hummock of volcanic earth, so that I gazed down into the emptiness of the monstrous fumarole. The absolute silence of its sloping, vitreous walls, testified to the purgative efficaciousness of the bomb, the secret weapon that had both blessed and damned. And the darkness at its centre, rejoicing in that silence, seemed to rise, and, after mixing with the smoke that polluted the air and sky, enveloped me.



*"But nothing can kill Richard Pike,"* someone said. "No,

*no, not old Dick Pike, the slayer of Satan himself. For he is the champion of the disinherited, the broken and the lost. He is the prince of exiles, the lord of defeats. And Satan has no power over one who, in defeat, is fated to sing the last song and have the last laugh. He will always be with us, even though his immortality constitute a rack of eternal pain."* And I seemed to hear another voice begin to sing the National Anthem. *"God save the Queen and all the royal family! God save England's ladies and lords!"*

*"Bravo! Hooray! Satan is dead,"* another voice cried. (We must have a good conclusion, you see.) *"We can now all do as we like!"* (And that's the moral.)

"Satan, yes," I mumbled, "He wanted to take old Dick Pike away, to goblin land, for all his past misdeeds and fun and frolic. Take him away to the bottomless pit!"

*"Goodbye, ladies and gentlemen: this is the whole of the original performance of Dick Pike, his time opera. And I remain still your most obedient and most humble servant to command. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye!"*

"Goodbye," I mumbled, "good –" Melchezidek stood over me. Unlike the time when I had dreamt of walking beneath my own house, and had heard real voices invading the walls of my consciousness, these verbal fragments, it seemed, had emanated from phantoms. Ghosts whose company I would – given the ludicrously pulped state of my body – soon make a surer acquaintance with.

My erstwhile batman had an arm extended protectively about my wife; lying in the crook of his opposite arm was Richard, my son.

"You're alive," I said, looking at them through tear-spangled lashes. "You've come back to me." Disengaging himself, Melchezidek delivered my son into his mother's safe keeping. "Joan?" I continued. "Is it really you?" I struggled and, with one great heave, managed to lever myself into a sitting position. And though I was a spirit no longer, but only my old, ugly self, a pleasant, ethereal numbness pervaded my burnt flesh and smashed bones, the beauty that had been mine for so few sweet minutes conferring upon me one last souvenir. "How is it? How is it that you are alive? That I am alive?"

"There are none living but us," said Melchezidek. "You walked here all the way from the enemy lines. For a man in your condition, an extraordinary feat."

"I flew," I said. *"Espiritu Santo* lifted me up into the sky." Again, I surveyed my broken body. No trace of transcendence remained. "But lately I've had difficulty knowing whether I'm dreaming or awake. To the degree, I think, that I no longer care."

"It is no matter. You have brought about the end of time," said Melchezidek. "For the human race. And for yourself. And in so doing you have delivered the Nephilim from eternity." I looked out over the vast, flat plain. It was covered in blood, ruin and night. London was ablaze. But in the far distance, shivering in the convective air that destabilized the horizon, were the colossal forms that had put their vegetative womb behind them and walked away from this scene of death and entropy into a new, inconceivable life. "Your opera, the

time opera of the Pikes, and that of mankind, is finished. The bomb ignited the atmosphere, and even now a vast fire-storm rages across the planet. In destroying the ancient enemy, humanity has destroyed itself. But it is right that things are so. The Nephilim are grateful." He gestured towards mother and child. "You may see how grateful."

"I did love you, you know," Joan said. "You were kind to me. Kinder than anyone had ever been before. It was something I found hard to understand. It was something —" A sob contorted her chest and she bowed her head. She looked as when I had first met her, the latest 15-year-old recruit of Madame Lotte's brothel in Greek Street. Her blonde hair was piled high, a few ringlets escaping to snake down her neck. Her doll-like face was that of an *ingénue*, yet also evinced a potential for infinite corruptibility. But because I had at once recognized in her an innocence that outweighed her apprentice wiles, I had fallen in love. I would take care of her, I had decided. I would make sure that the child who wore the crimson dress and six-inch heels, and whose face was larded with make-up, did not die.

She stepped forward, went down on her knees and, pulling the baby's blanket away from his face, showed me my son. "They say he is going to survive. That I will survive too. That though all humans are even now becoming as ghosts, or fictions, then this one song, this finale of the Pikes, will remain corporeal and be allowed to walk the planet with the new gods."

"But oh, Joan, is that such a good thing? To be alone, so alone —" She held Richard to my face, allowing me to kiss him.

"He will be fully human, that boy," said Melchezidek, in a bracing voice that seemed designed to encourage my hopes. "Not human like those latter-day men who lie dead across this plain. He will grow up without taint of the perverse. He will be free."

A pudgy, infant hand reached out and began to play with the chain and whistle looped about my neck. Wincing with effort, I took it off and slipped it over my little boy's head, as if it were a rosary.

"God bless you," I whispered. "If, that is, He has not died too."

"He really is your son, you know," said Joan. "All that I said, it was —"

"He takes after you, Joan. That's why he's so fair. Whatever has happened, it no longer matters. Not since this world came to an end and history was rewritten. The past is a *tabla rasa*, now, just like the future. Both have a potential equal only to our love."

I smiled and looked into my son's eyes, as blue as the sky had been before humanity had so polluted it. "Good luck, Richard. All this wretchedness that you see about you will depart, and you will have a new world to play in." I kissed him again. "But now I think I must leave you. Isn't that so, Melchezidek?"

"It is the covenant you made with the sword." He took Joan by her arm, gently assisted her to her feet and, as she stepped back, stooped and gathered my scorched body into his arms and lifted me. "Mankind changes

places with the Nephilim, just as you must go into the shadows in order that Joan and Richard may stay here." I turned to take a last look at my family.

"Forgive me, Joan," I said. "I was mad, you know."

"I was not a good wife, Ritchie."

"You were what you have always been: a sweet, sweet child. I should have treated you better. I should have — I should have *spoilt* you."

"But you did. I was a brat. Forgive me, too, won't you?"

I saw that she had picked *Espíritu Santo* up from where it lay upon the hard, blood-caked earth. "Please?"

"I love you, Joan."

Melchezidek began to carry me into the hell-mouth. And as feet, waist, shoulders and then, finally, the head of my wife disappeared, and as she raised Richard into the air so that the last sight I should have of Earth-Above would include him, I whispered, "The sword. Am I still the sword, Melchezidek?"

"The spirit of the sword is gone from you. You are cleansed. *Espíritu Santo* is now only a length of Toledo steel. The being it once contained, and which subsequently found a home in your family line is the spirit of the New Heaven and New Earth."

"And hell, Melchezidek?"

"Do not fear. It cannot embrace Joan and Richard. Hell is passing away, soon to be gone for ever, like the orcs. It has room in it now only for us."

And so we continued our descent, Melchezidek stumbling as his feet traversed the black, friable earth. Wisps of infernal smoke played about his ankles, the pit belching its radiation-thick stew into the atmosphere to travel about the world and make its contribution to the discordant bars of the last act of the human race. Smoke. Fire. The screams of the damned writhing in eternal torment. The smell of sulphur. Ghostly traces of blood and violence and desperate, striving love. Soon, soon, that would be all that there was left of a man, poet, soldier, lover, an artist of extremes, a lord and the myth of *Espíritu Santo*.

DX.2

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**Richard Calder**, born 1956, is the subject of the interview which follows.

An *Interzone* discovery from 1989, he is the author of the novels *Dead Girls* (1993), *Dead Boys* (1994), *Dead Things* (1996), *Cythera* (1998), *Frenzetta* (1998), *The Twist* (1999) and *Malignos* (2000). The above new story is the sixth and last in his "Lord Soho" series of tales (see *IZ* issues 154, 159, 161, 164 and 166 for the earlier episodes). Each is set in the same far-future world, but takes place a couple of generations after the preceding tale. Meanwhile, the latest of Richard's eight novels is *Impakto* (forthcoming from Simon & Schuster/Earthlight).

**E**scape. It is a word that looms over Richard Calder's work, both as theme and influence. If there is one event that seems to have plunged him into the world of the written imagination, it was his attempt to break away from the physical and psychological constraints of the cloying suburbia of his childhood.

"I grew up in East London, or rather the new East London that constitutes southern Essex. That is, the place the rest of the country makes jokes about. It was rather like growing up in a Mike Leigh play. And part of me is probably forever living next door to Abigail's Party."

Calder is of course not unique in his attempt to break the bonds of his upbringing – most adolescents with a modicum of imagination have used travel to escape and make themselves other. But in his understandable attempt to flee the Abigail's Party of his childhood, Calder has fled further and remained longer on alien shores than most of us. He has spent most of the past ten years in Thailand and latterly the Philippines, voluntarily exiled from the land of his birth. But for Calder, it is not so much the distance travelled that has offered him, and by extension, his characters, a sense of belonging, but the change in perspective, the opportunity to use the exotic in the sense of alien – Calder is scathing in his comments about viewing the Far East as an "exotic paradise," an earthly Shangri La for the package tourist and hippies in search of spiritual enlightenment and cheap opium – to create a home-coming of the mind.

"Though I've mostly lived abroad for the last ten years I believe the 'exile' or 'self-exile' you talk of exists, in me at least, principally as a state of mind. This is rather a difficult matter to talk of, since we're getting into areas of depth psychology here, and not rational motive. But there's a sense that travel, and particularly travel to a far-off country lying at 'the ends of the earth' is a metaphor that I have felt compelled to live out."

He also admits to a more prosaic reason for living in the Far East. With the disappearance of the midlist and the earmarking of huge advances for brand names like Stephen King or the latest forest-clearing epic fantasy, Calder would be unable to pursue his vocation on a fulltime basis if he lived in the West. Understandably, the prospect of taking up

# His Own Aesthetic



**Richard Calder**  
interviewed by Charles Rudkin

"real" work in a call centre, bank or similar alluring location has encouraged him to remain in parts of the globe where the cost of living consumes advances and royalties at a more sedate pace.

But anybody familiar with Calder's work will be in no doubt as to the primary motivation for his self-exile in the Far East. All his protagonists are exiles, escapees, from lands, or worlds, that have rejected them. He explains:

"But if I have come to consider 'exoticism' a rather vulgar artefact of the liberal-humanitarian imagination, I do own up to a quest – a subjective quest – for the 'fulfilment' that you mention. A quest that my journeys to the Far East have served to objectify. If one considers oneself to be an individual who is to a certain extent 'alienated,' then an alien land often seems to offer the best prospect of a homecoming. The heroes and heroines of my books are, I would say, engaged in a similar quest. The countries they leave behind have become hostile, ugly, vindictive places to which they feel they do not belong, places where they have, to an extent, become foreigners."

Alienation and the desire to escape to somewhere where one can belong all point to problems with identity, a theme that Calder says is as central to his work as escape.

"My characters are always hopelessly divided. They have problems with identity. And they are always, always trying to escape." And again this crisis of identity, what Calder calls living in two worlds, is something that informs his own personal experience. Even in the Philippines, there is still a part of him that will be forever Essex, as he admitted earlier, and "this sense of living in two worlds

has, I think, gone on to inform all my work, if in very different ways."

But why did he feel the need to travel so far? I asked him. Why not settle somewhere in Europe, or even in Brighton, a city far more accommodating of the Bohemian and the counter-culture than your average English city?

Calder does not answer the question directly. He admits to liking Brighton (where he went to university), finding it atypical of the normal English city. He also does not rule out living in another European country. But one gets the feeling that he will remain in Asia for some time. This is because he appears bent on not just escaping the wastes of Romford, but Britain itself (referred to less than flatteringly as the Darkling Isle in his last novel *Malignos* and the *Lord Soho* series of stories recently gracing these pages). He admits: "I can't help feel both depressed and disturbed by the surliness, wilful ignorance and general beastliness of my fellow countrymen."

Take this quote from *Dead Girls*, for example. "The English, Dad said, were reverting to type; John Bull growled with atavistic savagery." Richard Pike in *Malignos* chooses to flee the Darkling Isle because of his liaison with one of the creatures of the Perverse, the world below, that the powers of the Darkling Isle have been in the forefront of extirpating. "I had come to hate the English. Hate them as much as they hated me." The *Lord Soho* series abounds with images of a cruel, intolerant ruling class and a brutish, ignorant mass.

So perhaps just as languages become harder to master the further east you go, so it is with culture. Perhaps the cultures of Europe are too

close to those of Britain for Calder to lose himself in the alien, to capture that sense of belonging he and the protagonists of his novels aspire to. Indeed, in an earlier interview in 1997 Calder admitted that he moved to Thailand "to get as far away from England as possible." One suspects that time has not modified that view. At the same time it is not really physical distance that matters, but cultural distance, a fundamentally different way of perceiving the world.

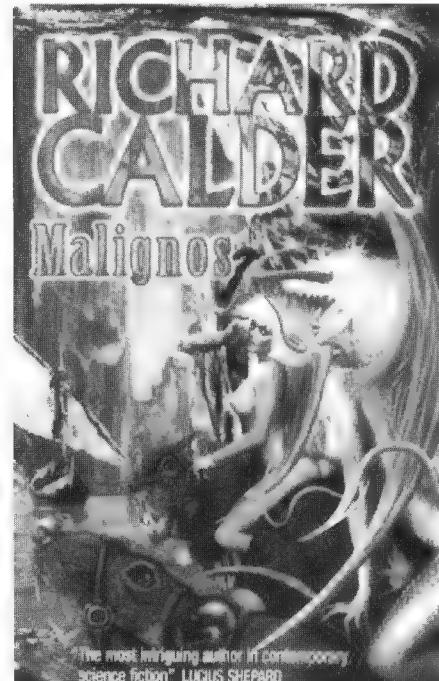
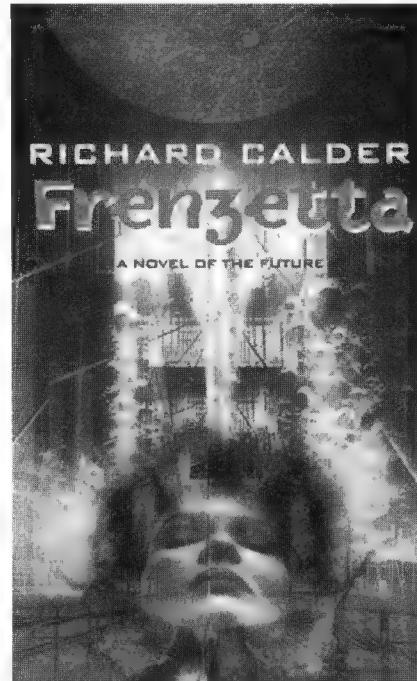
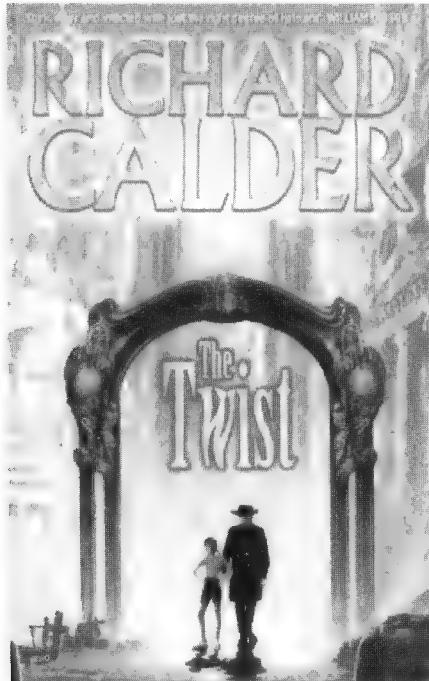
But to find a homecoming in a far land of course hints at finding that exotic paradise of unspoilt beaches and cold Pina Coladas (made with organic ingredients, of course) that Calder is at pains to condemn. He points out that none of his characters find what they are looking for in the physical world.

"In the end, of course, their adventures and experiences tend to indicate that the home they desire, the place of belonging, of rightness, is not to be found, no matter how far they travel. It is rather a mysterious state of being, a psychological state."

They go through a process of disenchantment with either their desired refuge in the physical world, as in Thailand for Ignatz Zwakh and Primavera in the "Dead" trilogy, and the Moon for Duarte and Princess Frenzetta in *Frenzetta*, or more mysterious metaphysical havens such as Cythera in the novel of the same name, or in Venus, land of the dead, in *The Twist*.

This disillusionment is also evident in Calder's attitude to his adopted homeland, even if it is not as complete or the cause of such drastic consequences as it is for the characters in his novels.

"What I discovered in South-East



Asia was a concretization of certain, perhaps central elements of my inner life, a correlation of alienation and the alien. I felt oddly 'at home.' I was, of course, seeing things through a mist of presuppositions and prejudices about what exactly Asia was – the worst kind of romantic prejudices – but the enchantment with Asia has lasted, no matter how much the illusions I have entertained about it have been stripped away by time and experience. My 'orientalism' is probably a combination of a joy at being immersed in Otherness and a less joyful, slow process of disillusionment."

But while Calder's characters find that the physical universe offers no sanctuary, a change in perception, the discovery of a psychological territory, "the only real homecoming any of my characters may reasonably expect," does take place. The desires of the characters are to some extent fulfilled, their fissured personalities made whole, a transformation of sorts effected. But the change is subtle, not thunderous, and revolves around the affirmation of romantic love and the discovery of tenderness.

"The quest for the metaphysical, or psychological, homeland you mention, a place of fulfilment, seems to end, for my heroes and heroines, in a debacle often involving some apocalyptic rending of the world, or a world. But they do seem to discover, at last, something more important than the prospect of mind-blowing, Wagnerian transformation. And that something is tenderness. They are moved. In a very quiet way, something shifts deep at the core of their being. Something breaks through the savagery of the world they have internalized. I'm thinking of the way *Dead Girls* and *Cytherea* end. A bittersweet discovery of tenderness fol-

lowing a brutal purgatory of cumulative loss. If my anti-heroes and heroines discover, in their quests, anything at all of worth, it's that it's possible for tenderness to exist. Even in a very dark place."

Or, it's not where you are but what you feel.

It is obvious that at the centre of his novels is Calder himself. This is not to say that the author appears directly in his novels, that they are somehow autobiographical, as he is at pains to point out. Given what his characters go through, that is something Calder is probably grateful for. Rather, they act as masks through which he can speak to his audience. His experiences and obsessions are refracted through his characters, and his psychological presence and emotional shade loom large over his work. Paul Di Filippo perhaps describes it most accurately when in nominating Calder as one of the two most distinctive sf voices of the 1990s (the other was Greg Egan) he argues: "he pursues the other grand avenue of SF: obsessive personal mythography."

One theme that Calder does not mention explicitly, but which appears in all of his novels and was frequently mentioned during his interview is that of intolerance. Ignatz Zwakh and Primavera flee persecution and death in *Dead Girls*, as do Dahlia Chan and Dr Max Moroder/Jack Pimpernel/Captain Tarquin/Michael Flynn (problems with identity, again) in *Cytherea* and Princess Frenzetta and Duane Duarte in *Frenzetta*. In *The Twist*, Flask and the Venusian Viva Venera are considered beyond the pale by those archetypes of 1950s US middle-class stolidity and banality, the parents of the child protagonist Nicola E. New-

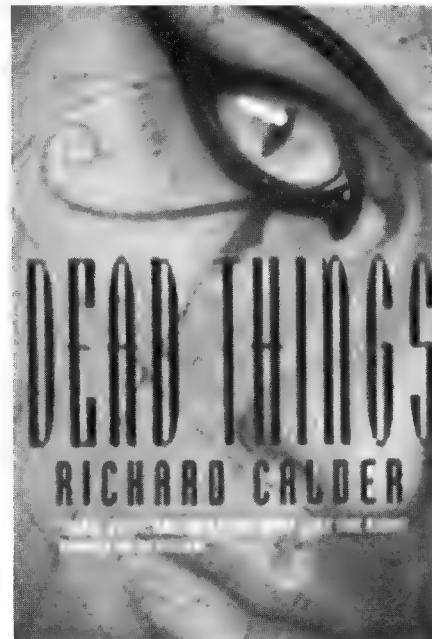
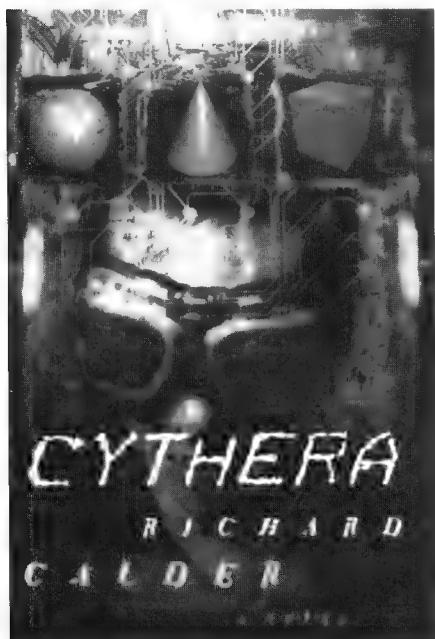
ton. In his last novel, *Malignos*, Pike has to flee the "Darkling Isle" to an impecunious exile in *las Pilipinas*, because of his illegal liaison with Gala, a creature of the Perverse.

But the characters themselves are not passive victims of cruelly oppressive regimes. They are rebels against the ruling political and moral orders of the day and, with the exception of Pike, and the protagonists in the *Lord Soho* series of novellas, they fight back against their persecutors. They are *viral*.

"My characters, especially my central characters and narrators, are all outsiders and pariahs. Their behaviour is extremely against the grain. People who flout society's conventions and spit in the eye of accepted morality. People beyond the pale. In my novels, this often means that they are, in some way, sexual outsiders. They have 'exotic' tastes, and enter into what society feels to be inappropriate liaisons. In being proscribed, they usually turn out to be political rebels, too. They seek to overturn the system. Or, at least, corrupt it."

That Calder thinks Britain has an abundance of intolerance is clear, and although he does not recount any horror stories of his childhood upbringing, the estates and school playgrounds of England have never been known for embracing difference and diversity, as he himself has undoubtedly experienced. And that Calder has not experienced the same level of intolerance in Thailand is clear.

But he also attacks another form of intolerance; that of censorship. Here, like his characters, he sees himself as something of a rebel, indeed believes that writers in general should exist on the margins of society. Writers should question literary conventions and the



prevailing social mores of the day. Indeed, this is one of the reasons he chose to write within the science-fiction and fantasy genres.

"I must say I rather like being part of a tradition which isn't terribly respectable. It'd be salutary sometimes, I think, for more people in the genre to explore science fiction as the province of literary outlaws."

While Calder says that he has never deliberately set out to shock, considering it "vulgar," he believes that no subject should be taboo, that creating controversy and debate is what every novelist should aspire to. But writers who take that course can expect trenchant criticism, much of it verging on the personal, as well as lavish praise – as Calder discovered with the "Dead" trilogy, *Dead Girls*, *Dead Boys* and *Dead Things*.

The trilogy had quite an impact when its respective volumes were published in 1993, 1994 and 1996. Much, if not most of the criticism was positive, with writers and readers alike lauding Calder as a new major talent in the genre. However, others were disturbed by the candour with which he laid bare his obsessions about childhood, sexuality and romantic love. And it has to be said that the concept of young teenage girls being transformed into vampiric gynoids, or dolls – not to mention graphic images of gutted girls and green semen – was disturbing.

Yet some of the attacks verged on the vicious and personal, especially those penned by the anonymous reviewers writing for *Kirkus Reviews*, a shadowy publication (a web search reveals little about who is behind it or who writes for it) that appears to have its own obsessive mission to place political correctness at the centre of science fiction and fantasy. The reviewer, or reviewers, of the three novels – it is hard to say, as those who write the reviews prefer to remain

nameless – accused Calder, unjustifiably in my view, of misogyny. With the incisiveness and precision for which *Kirkus Reviews* may one day be famed, one reviewer dismissed his work with the epithet, "horrid!"

Such criticism, the accusation that Calder loathes 50% of the human race, clearly rankles, especially given the key role that women, and romantic love, play in his work, not to mention the many passages from *Dead Girls* to *Malignos* that clearly condemn the often brutal way that men treat women. Like myself he asked of *Kirkus*: "who are they?" At the same time, such criticism is inevitable – and an affirmation of his belief that writers should be "literary outlaws." While the barbs thrown by *Kirkus* and others may hurt Calder, they surely cannot surprise him.

Since then, while his novels have continued to receive critical acclaim from fellow writers such as Paul McAuley, Paul Di Filippo and Norman Spinrad, they have failed to achieve either the wider recognition, or, perhaps more importantly for Calder, the controversy that his first three novels generated. He expresses no regret at this, saying merely: "I've done the childhood thing to death. It's time to move on." And certainly while Calder's concerns are still at the forefront of his novels, with his characters, as always, serving "as masks" for himself, childhood as a theme has steadily receded into the background. At the same time, the novels have become quieter (given the uncomfortable subject matter, relentless energy and hallucinogenic imagery in the first three novels that could hardly be otherwise). *Malignos*, with its middle-aged exiled cynic and ex-soldier, Richard Pike, is, for all its black humour and the lush imagery prevalent in so much of Calder's work, in essence a straightforward, exciting quest through foreign lands both

beloved and familiar to readers of sword-and-sorcery fantasy. It is hard to see how it could cause affront to anybody.

In Calder's earlier work, questions of identity, escape and transformation were bundled together into the overarching theme of childhood or, perhaps more accurately, childhood and adolescence. Childhood and adolescence are times when identity is still being formed, and hence still malleable. Children escape into their own private worlds, adolescents dream of escaping the world they are in. Childhood, and, above all, adolescence are periods of profound change.

But Calder was also examining the perceptions that adults have of childhood. He believes that with the loss of religious faith we have made childhood the new repository of innocence and purity, or as he puts it: "People don't believe in anything. Childhood has become our new transcendent." He claims that this has led us to try to preserve childhood as some kind of innocent idyll, whereas up to the 18th century parents were trying to turn children into adults as quickly as possible so they could cope.

Calder believes that our contemporary vision of children is wishful thinking, that in reality the "world of childhood is dark and wonderful, a mixture of casual brutality and total wonder at the world." So "a lot of my work deals with that perspective of childhood, red in tooth and claw."

What is more, people are aware of this darker side to children, and fear it, something he feels was highlighted in Britain by the Jamie Bulger murder, a case which he admits fascinates him. "We feel that childhood innocence is good, but we also fear children, they are at the same time a new evil." These themes are to some extent present in the "Dead" trilogy, especially



with the ability of children, or more precisely in this work, adolescents, to commit bloody mayhem if they are thwarted in their desires. Although the actions of Zwakh and Primavera are as nothing compared to the ghettoization of youth and the mass slaughter of dolls – girls infected by the Cartier nanovirus – by an adult world fearful that its youth is about to destroy it.

However, Calder's belief in our Manichean view of childhood has its clearest expression in *Cythera*, in my view his best, if not his most accessible, novel to date. Calder says that the inspiration for the novel came from a series of news reports that he heard on the World Service while in Thailand which suggested the "Darkling Isle" was gripped by a hysterical fear that bands of children were committing crime and mayhem and threatening to destroy society as we know it.

In *Cythera*, young boys are incarcerated in boys' towns, ostensibly to protect them from corruption, but in reality to protect an adult world fearful of their exuberance. At the same time, the novel deals with a more publicly recognized assault by adults on children – sexual abuse. Both protagonists, Michael Flynn (et al) and Dahlia Chan, have been robbed of their childhood by abusive adults, Flynn by his father (although here it is uncertain whether the abuse is real or imagined) and Chan by Flynn, or his original, elder manifestation. In *Cythera* Calder employs a complex narrative structure to explore these delicate themes without ever losing clarity or subtlety. Yet it is almost certainly his least-read and most underrated work.

But after *Cythera*, the overarching theme of childhood begins to fade into the background. In *Frenzetta* the theme, while not completely absent, is minor, and while on the surface

Calder returns to it in *The Twist* by making a nine-year-old girl the protagonist, he admits that Newton is "an adult pretending to be a child." And then we come to his last novel, *Malignos*, where not only is the childhood theme completely absent, but other Calderesque refrains such as self-identity, the desire for escape and homecoming, are given far less prominence than in his previous work.

Nowhere is this more clear than with the protagonist of the novel, Richard Pike. Unlike his predecessors, Pike wants to return to the land from which he has been exiled. At the end of *Malignos* he remains in his place of exile, and accepts his lot, whereas before Calder's characters had either achieved their psychological homecoming through a shift (nearly always achieved through death) from one state of existence to another, or were, in the case of Nicola E. Newton in *The Twist* and the elder Flynn in *Cythera*, waiting for that shift (again through death) to occur. I asked him why Pike seemed so different from the other protagonists, and he replied: "Pike is older than the narrators who precede him. And his perceptions are correspondingly different. He is certainly, I think, more cynical, even if his cynicism is shot through with a blackly comic self-knowledge of his own rottenness. But his quest, too, ends in another kind of knowledge: a discovery of new tenderness towards the woman he loves, but has treated badly."

There are other signs of a change in focus. The casual brutality that Calder's protagonists often showed to anybody who got in their way is far less evident in *Malignos*. Nothing shows this more than in Pike's relationship with the Tasmanian, whom at first he despises then grows to respect and care for. Before, such tenderness had been reserved for the pro-

tagonists, the male/female pairing at the heart of every Calder novel (with the exception of the Trinity of Mr Twist, Nicola E. Newton and Viva Venera in *The Twist*). Acceptance and redemption are the themes in this novel, not escape and transcendence. And, perhaps more important, Calder's desires and demons affect the flow of the story far less than they do in his earlier work, something that Paul McAuley ("journey outward, rather than inward") was urging in him to do as long ago as his *Interzone* review of *Cythera*.

So why this shifting of theme, this softening of tone? As with all Calder's novels to date, it is important to keep in mind that the "psychogeography," to borrow a term that he uses in *The Twist*, the novel's map, is Calder's own. Earlier he spoke of his "bittersweet disillusionment" with Asia, a feeling that seems to have its direct expression in Pike. And all this strongly suggests that these changes are taking place because Calder is getting older. This growing "maturity" appears to manifest itself in his future writing plans. He says that after his forthcoming novel, *Lord Soho* (a linked group of novellas that have recently appeared in *Interzone* and are due to be published by Earthlight) this thematic change will become much more pronounced. "I hope that weaning myself onto a new approach will enable my characters and themes to 'grow up' and achieve a fully autonomous life."

And what is at this centre of this thematic sea change?

"In the end, I suppose it's an attempt to efface myself. All my novels up to now have been extremely Romantic affairs. Their subject is selfhood, masks, and the problems of the self – the damned 'I' and its quest for some kind of redemption. The author himself, of course, has never been visi-



ble – only a persona. A voice. Well, I certainly mean to keep the author invisible. But I want to lose his talking head. I'm seeking to do a kind of gradual, metaphysical striptease. Cast away more and more items that constitute a 'voice,' and eventually go naked. I'm interested in evolving some kind of vanishing act. A performance without a performer. I dare say all my old concerns and obsessions will remain – though transformed, I should imagine."

The removal of Calder's psychological presence from his work, the separation of theme from the personal and the obsessive, is the ultimate sign that the passage of time is profoundly affecting his work, that it is "coming of age." As we become older, we realize more and more that the world does not revolve around us, but is separate, unaffected by our desires. Calder appears to have come to the realization that this applies to his novels as well. Like a doting mother no longer able to ignore the transformations that time and biology have wrought on her offspring, he is severing the children of his imagination from the psychological hearth so that they can lead lives free of his looming presence. He is going to let them escape.

Before Calder went to lose himself on foreign shores, he escaped into the world of aesthetics and culture, into what he terms "the snobbishness of desperation... I didn't really become very 'bookish' until I left school at 16. After a short period of work, I went on to a College of Further Education. Discovered Baudelaire and the Velvet Underground in the same week, and very quickly began to distance myself from the milieu in which I lived."

He has never looked back. His works are littered with cultural and literary references, watered by innumerable sources ranging from high

opera to *manga*, from Baudelaire's poetry and Nabokov's prose to the music of the Velvet Underground and the marionettes of puppet theatre. At times, the sheer number of influences and borrowings Calder says inform his work have overwhelmed this interviewer. Trying to make sense of his gleeful plundering of culture high and low, I asked him which of these influences were most central to his work.

He mentioned a plethora of authors, artistic movements, artists and musicians. But some he mentioned stood out more than others. He pointed out that all his novels involve his characters going on a quest, both in physical space and in the mind. For the former, he cited *The Lord of the Rings* for the way in which it evoked landscape; and for the latter he named Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, a quest to recover memory. Calder, who was a poet until 28, also cites Baudelaire as being of "lasting importance." At one stage in his youth Baudelaire's poetry seemed to effect his whole outlook, a poetic prism through which all the other formative influences of his teenage years passed.

"The Velvets' first album seemed to conjure up a similar kind of inner landscape. Thus Lou Reed and John Cale joined Charles and Jeanne for the phantasmagorical *Live Show*. The cover artwork of the first album – not the Andy Warhol banana, but the inner sleeve, with its portraits of Cage, Reed, Nico and the others – haunted me, as if it were inviting me into a kind of modern, chrome-and-plastic Baudelairean world. A proto-cyberpunk world, really, if I'd only known it then."

It is an influence that has clearly lasted. Baudelaire's themes – beauty, love, death, alienation, forbidden appetites, pervade Calder's work. Above all though, it is in the tone of

his work and the style of his prose that the hand of Baudelaire is most evident. The prose is often lush, rich, heavily perfumed with longing and sweet decay. While in some of the novels Calder's prose groans under the weight of its own ornamentation, in his *Lord Soho* series of stories the quality of the prose comes closest to capturing the spirit of Baudelaire's poetry. It is rich without being overpowering, painting a highly visual picture of obsessed characters pursuing their dreams of love, power and redemption in baroque landscapes draped in deep carnal velvet shades of red and black.

Vladimir Nabokov is another writer Calder admires and says is seminal to his work. Again this is evident in the themes of his novels, especially that of childhood, but he says that it is Nabokov's prose style that exerts the most influence. It is "dandified," he argues – and he uses this term in what he claims in its original, exact, meaning.

Other cultural borrowings are less seminal. Rather they serve as props, theatrical scenery to create the right landscape, the right mood and tone. Calder says he has a visual imagination, and his choice of props tends to confirm that. *Manga* was vital in creating the frenetic Loony Tunes-on-acid tone of the "Dead" trilogy. But *Manga* doesn't move him in the same way that French symbolist poetry does.

"When I began *Dead Girls* I wanted to create a 'cartoonish' feel to the book. But I've always been more interested in the 'idea' of *manga/animé* than in *manga/animé* itself. An odd, skewed way of dealing with characterization. A self-conscious, rather campy way of handling dialogue. A certain kind of fast-paced, insane way of editing a narrative and a wholly unreal way of dealing with violence. I was interested, that is, in creating a very



artificial world."

This unreal treatment of violence was also evident in *Cythera*, *Frenzetta* and *The Twist*. Calder says that the latter two novels were inspired by Punch and Judy, again because they treat violence in a totally unreal way. "Both Newton and Duarte are virtually indestructible, they just wipe everything out in their path. They are comic-book anti-heroes." The black humour in Punch and Judy also appeals to him. He likens Duarte and Newton to "Mr Punch, a dastard who always wins and survives, even getting the hangman to kill himself at the end of the show."

The surreal atmosphere this approach creates is vital to Calder's work. Throughout the interview he described his work as being a "mixture of brutality and tenderness." While the tenderness in the novels arises from the romantic love binding together his male/female partnerships, the brutality is generated by the frenetic energy and impossible violence of manga and animé, of fairy tale and pantomime.

Other bits of scenery that Calder has dragged in from outside to help create his surrealist and baroque visions are peculiar to the novels themselves. The idea for the quantum clockwork Cartier dolls comes from the story of Coppellia, a mechanical doll in one of the *Tales of Hoffmann*. Calder cites Offenbach's opera version of the tale in which Hoffmann falls in love with Olympia as being particularly influential. The "Dead" trilogy was also strongly influenced by the disturbing doll sculptures of German artist Hans Bellmer, one of which was used on the jacket of the first edition of *Dead Girls*. Indeed the image was so disturbing that the publishers, who reluctantly agreed to use it on the hardback edition, refused to let it grace the cover of

the paperback version, something that might have caused Bellmer, who made the sculptures partly as a sign of dissent against the Nazis, and partly as an expression of the erotic, as much bemusement as it caused Calder.

Other influences are less controversial and more familiar to fantasy readers. *Malignos* is strongly influenced by the sword & sorcery work of Michael Moorcock. Pike is reminiscent of one of Moorcock's drier, more cynical characters (D'Averc from the "Runestaff" quartet springs to mind). And Calder agrees the personification of the sword Espíritu Santo is basically a very camp, lisping Stormbringer.

But the most eclectic set of influences that Calder names has to be found in *The Twist*. Here the manic psychobilly of the Cramps meets the philosophy of Situationism with the tropes of the Western serving as a background. The French director Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*, and the comedies of Jerry Lewis also had a hand in forming this very peculiar novel. Not all the formative influences made the final cut. "Oliver Twist may have perished somewhere along that road," Calder says. But there is more than enough to be going on with – and all with Mr Punch looking gleefully on as he beats the groggy, disorientated reader with his semantic club.

While I have to admit that I can't see Jerry Lewis's manic presence in the novel, certain scenes in *The Twist* do read better with the Cramps as a soundtrack. For example, the scene at the beginning of the novel where the zanies with their long rubbery legs lope after the carriage carrying the protagonists surely just has to be read to the accompaniment of "Like a Bad Girl Should." And the zanies themselves just have to be modelled on the cover of the Cramps' 1984 album *Bad Music for Bad People*, with its picture

of a leering green zombie and Elvis haircut.

But what of place? Given that Calder lives in self-imposed literary exile in the Far East, surely location plays a central role in shaping the novels? After all, Thailand features prominently in the "Dead" trilogy, *Cythera* and *Frenzetta*, while *Malignos* and his forthcoming novel *Impakto* are set in the Philippines, Calder's present home.

It seems not. He says that his time in the Far East has not exerted a great influence on his novels, that where he hasn't been is just as important when it comes to writing his stories. Indeed, a psychogeographically transformed Far West is the setting for *The Twist*, while *Lord Soho* take place in England and, in one episode, Paris.

This is not to say that place is unimportant to Calder. "Exotic places stimulate me, generally speaking," he admits. But like manga, psychobilly, clothes, Hong Kong and all the other cultural paraphernalia that give colour and texture to his novels, place serves as a prop. It is the shifting scenery in the background, designed to give the necessary illumination, the appropriate visuals, to Calder's tales of tainted love, brutality and tenderness, escape and homecoming, damnation and redemption.

Calder now has a large body of work behind him – seven published novels with two more awaiting publication. Partly through my reaction to his work and an abiding fascination with how authors and artists view their own work in retrospect, I asked him what he thought of them. Which ones was he most pleased with and, more interestingly, which were the lemons?

He nominated *Malignos* as a work he was particularly proud of. I was a little taken aback by this. While



*Malignos* is a much easier read than his previous novels due to a paring down of style and a far more straightforward narrative, it is basically a straightforward fantasy romp, even if it stands out from the competition because of its cynical protagonist and black humour. What about the novel that made his reputation, *Dead Girls*, or my own favourite work, *Cythera*?

He did not reply to this directly, but said that writing is a learning process, that his work has developed with time. This of course implies that Calder's literary oeuvre has shown a steady progression in quality and maturity. But it also implies that there are perhaps novels that he is not so pleased with. I asked him whether any of his novels stood out as being particularly weak. Alas, Calder pleaded literary amnesia (echoes of *In Search of Lost Time* perhaps?), saying that he had written many of his novels so long ago, it was difficult for him to recall them in any detail. But he also admitted that he didn't want to do a literary equivalent of a Gerald Ratner by disowning any of his earlier novels, especially as two of them (*The Twist* and *Frenzetta*) are being republished in the US.

So how does he react to those critics who say that his work is too self-indulgent, the prose style too affected and verbose? He admits they have a point. "My earlier novels – at least, up to *Frenzetta* – moved towards a sort of vanishing point of the baroque." *Frenzetta* was his "high point in stylistic accretion." Since then he has tried to rein in his style, with some success. While *The Twist* is to my mind as over-elaborate as its immediate predecessor, *Malignos* and the *Lord Soho* sequence of stories are less burdened with the overly flowery sentences and obscure 18th-century synonyms that litter *Frenzetta* and *The Twist*.

While I am in general an admirer of Calder's work, I admitted to him that I found *Frenzetta* and *The Twist* easy to dislike, both because of the cloying prose and because the protagonists in the novels were so unattractive. Indeed I found both novels to be much weaker than the work that precedes

(with the exception of *Dead Boys*, which is burdened with so much stylistic and narrative experimentation that it collapses under its own weight into a black hole of incoherence) and follows it. I put it to Calder that the novels prior to *Frenzetta* and *The Twist* had a less ornamental prose style and more likeable characters. He replied by saying that the protagonists in both novels were made to be deliberately unattractive to the reader, were studies in dastardliness. He makes this explicit at the end of *Frenzetta*, when Princess Frenzetta says to Duarte:

"What complete bastards we are, Duane."

"True... They've got nothing on us for sheer callousness," replies her brain-eating amour.

And a little later this gleeful little exchange:

"Just you and me, Duane."

"Total egotism, Frenzy."

"Utter selfishness."

"Arrant solipsism

"Through-and-through narcissism."

The trouble with creating characters that are so awful, so without redeeming qualities, is that it is a cast-iron way of alienating your reader and ensuring that your novel ends up being flung into a corner in disgust. It is the sort of thing they warn you against doing at writing school – with good reason. I told Calder that I found the protagonists so unpleasant, their treatment of those unfortunate to cross their path so vicious, that I was constantly hoping for the painful and prolonged demise of Nicola E. Newton, Lieutenant Duane and the rest. The brutality of the previous novels was present, but not enough of the tenderness, something which Calder appeared to acknowledge when he mused: "Well, perhaps I got the balance wrong in those novels."

So what of the future? We have already seen that Calder plans to let his themes come of age by exorcising the "damned I." But this change will

also be reflected in the narrative. His novels have always been told in the first person, have always featured a romantically linked couple, either prominently as in *Cythera* or *Dead Girls*, or looming in the background in novels such as *Malignos* or *Dead Things*. This approach has been abandoned in the novel that Calder is presently working on – in favour of a third-person narrative and multiple character viewpoints.

The style will change too, moving away from the perfumed ornateness that has marked, and sometimes marred, his previous work. "I want to pare down my style, move towards an ever-increasing simplicity (just as my earlier novels – at least, up to *Frenzetta* – moved towards a sort of vanishing point of the baroque)."

And the results of all these changes of direction are already bearing fruit. Calder describes his new project thus: "I'm presently at work on something I hope will be quite new – in its general attack, if not the specifics of its subject matter. It's a big, far-future science-fiction novel with a multiple-viewpoint narrative. It's sort of Mervyn Peake in mirrorshades. Tolkien *noir*." An intriguing prospect indeed; but while Calder compares his new novel to the two greatest fantasy writers of the 20th century, one suspects that whatever similarities there are will be superficial.

For all Richard Calder's works share one thing in common – they could not have been written by anybody else. The universes contained within them are his alone. In the widest sense of the term, Calder is an artist, his visions unheeded by his publishers, his audience or Volume 10 of a branded, over-marketed fantasy setting that might have started as something new but now owes its existence purely to the prospect of future sales. That might cause discomfort and frustration to his audience, as it sometimes has to this interviewer. But ultimately the fact that Calder pursues his own aesthetic is something for which we should be thankful, for it ensures that he will continue to offer his readers an escape into worlds uniquely his.



# Martian Madness

*Thomas M. Disch*

This was the first time Pepsi-Cola Levine had attended the Interplanetary Fashion Theory Conference on Mars, and the first time she had worshipped the super-celebrity and monotheistic goddess Rwng at her shrine in the lounge of the Acidalia Hilton.

On the second day of the Conference Pepsi (as most of her beaux and ladyfriends called her) had read the paper she had written for the occasion, "The Ties that Bind," a study of colour-coding in costumes designed over the course of seven centuries for productions of Molière's *Don Juan*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and Act 4 of Shaw's *Man and Superman*, with especial reference to the "flame-coloured ribbons" that Molière's Sganarelle speaks of his master wearing in Act I, scene 2. Were these ribbons not, Pepsi suggested, a full-frontal reference to the ribbons that would represent the flames rising from the pit of Hell into which the Don is dragged as the curtain falls? Might not these red ribbons be a key to later theatrical representation of libertinage down through the ages?

With this key in her hand Pepsi conducted a slide-show tour through the flames and ribbons of hell, with appropriate audio assists from a pirated recording of Cesare Siepi's "*Fin ch'an del vino!*" from a 1958 production at the Metropolitan Opera, with costumes by Eugene Berman. And such costumes! The audience (of mostly, and most appropriately, remote-controlled mannikins) applauded each slide as though it were a living supermodel taking a turn on the runway.

No one was more appreciative than Rwng Herself, who was attending the conference incognito with her inorganic friend and worshipper Xglotl. She loved academic congresses of all kinds – and pyjama parties and bingo halls and anything else that might liven the long Martian nights. She was the least particular of goddesses with respect to partying. Any pretext would serve so long as there were suitable and abundant libations.

"That was such a scrumptious presentation," Rwng gushed to the beautifully preserved Ph.D. afterwards

beside her shrine in the hotel lounge. "But such a wicked fellow!"

"Wicked?" Xglotl echoed absent-mindedly. He was as usual doing tax audits with more than half his immense consciousness. "Who's that?"

"Why, Don Giovanni, of course. Or Don Juan, if you prefer."

"Because he had sex? But all humans have sex. Unless they've been neutered in some way." It swivelled one sensor toward Pepsi and flickered a roseate beam of light on her enhanced nipples. "You're not neutered, are you?" She shook her head. "No, I didn't suppose so." It returned to its spreadsheets, its due courtesy performed.

"Oh, it wasn't the sex," Rwng declared. "It was the man's atheism. I can't abide atheists."

"Me neither," Pepsi concurred. If the goddess had looked into her heart, she would have known Pepsi was lying and was an atheist herself. But she was also a licensed adventuress and would not gratuitously have contradicted anyone so evidently well-heeled as this monstrously obese masquerader, whose necklace alone might have funded the entire academic congress, if the diamonds weren't paste.

"Have another drink, my dear," the goddess offered, and dinged Pepsi's flute with a gilded fingertip. At once it was refilled with the Hilton's choicest Moët-Chandon.

"However did you do that?" Pepsi marvelled.

"She's a goddess," said Xglotl. "Didn't you know?"

"I'd no idea," said Pepsi, without in the least seeming to marvel. In fact, she didn't believe it, and supposed that the fat woman had done some kind of bar trick that depended on the peculiar low gravity of Mars. As an atheist she didn't believe in gods or goddesses, even when she met them in the flesh, as she often did on the outer planets. However, she was quite ready to pretend to believe in the divinity of such beings, if it might prove in some way to her advantage.

Which, on this occasion, it did, for Rwng took a fancy

to her in the capricious way gods do and suggested that they go shopping together in the Hilton's mall.

"Should I come, too?" Xglotl asked disconsolately.

"No, my dear, this is strictly a girl thing. But do let us use your discount card."

Obligingly Xglotl emitted a plastic card entitling the user to a percent discount on all purchases, with the exception of items from a long list of independent boutiques. In effect the card was only useful for fragrances and souvenir tee-shirts from the Verizon-Disney remainder counter in the basement of the mall, but you had to read the small print to know that. "Have fun," it told them.

And off they went in two comic shopping carts provided by the parking attendant. As they putt-putted along, leaving a wake of astonished stares, Rwng told her new friend that today she would be the teacher and Pepsi the student, and that their subject would be shopping.

"You say you are an adventuress. Well, we shall have an adventure – an adventure in Power-Shopping. You shall purchase such a wardrobe of frills and name-brand bangles and XXX-rated erotica as ever tourist brought home from Bangkok. Hang left at the next aisle and follow me!"

The goddess's cart took a sharp turn into Aisle 7 – Versace Scarves and Bustiers – and Pepsi's came after, listing alarmingly, for Pepsi, a willowy creature, did not offer her cart much in the way of steadyng ballast.

The goddess honked and waved at another cart in the crosswalk ahead. "Jimmy!" she caroled. "Jimmy!"

The man driving the cart braked to a stop, and Pepsi recognized him as Jimmy Balboa, the Brazilian Deridean scheduled to appear on Thursday's Post-Modern Hair panel with Pepsi. His beard was a veritable banyan tree among beards, but he was otherwise a conservative dresser. Nothing he wore telegraphed the least datum of his income, and so Pepsi did not give much attention to his brief exchange with Rwng.

Rwng began coyly, "Jimmy, if I were not Myself God Almighty..."

"But you are," Jimmy said, interrupting politely, "and I just adore you."

"Thank you, my dear—" accepting the kiss he pressed on her many-diamonded hand, "—that's very devout of you. You almost make me forget what I was going to say. Oh yes: I thought your paper on 13th-century West African hair design was brilliant. I realize you haven't *read* it yet, or published, but one of the few advantages of omniscience is that one does keep up to date, and then some. This is my friend, Pepsi Levine, have you met? Well, now you have. We are out Power-Shopping, so we mustn't keep you any longer. Give my love to all those dear children – how many are there now, 23?"

"Thirty," Professor Balboa said, with a modestly assertive twist of his whiskers. "The last one was unboxed just before I caught the shuttle. A girl: Brioche."

Rwng turned to Pepsi and explained, "All Jimmy's little ones are named for French desserts and pastries, isn't that darling? Tartine, Madeleine, Napoleon, Eclaire, Papilote. It gives a new meaning to 'I could just eat you up!'"

With no more adieux, the goddess gave a farewell honk,

loud as a tugboat, and headed on to where a semblance of cascading pearls blinked: ARMANI MARS ARMANI.

"Jimmy," the goddess confided, as they pulled into the Armani parking slot, "is ever so clever, and as nearly omniscient as any mortal can be with a degree from Penn State. No one knows more about Benin hair styling. And such a prolific little paterfamilias (if I say so Myself, Who blessed him with his fecundity): 20 children *before* he got tenure and every single one of them a parthenogenic clone."

"He must be quite well-to-do," Pepsi observed.

"He is fabulously wealthy. His kin are the Balboas and own half the Amazon. But all that means nothing to him. He lives for art. His whole life revolves around traditional African hair styles. But enough of all that. Let's shop!"

They shopped for hours – with ever increasing pleasure and recklessness. After Armani, they did all the other boutiques and even, as they exited the mall, picked up an ounce of Martian Madness at the Verizon-Disney counter in the basement, for which Pepsi Levine did receive a percent discount.

Xglotl, for his part, received a kickback of 25 percent on all of Pepsi's other purchases.

And Rwng got half of that.

She smiled as she ingested the wad of bills. "What I liked about her best," she reminisced, as she let Herself sink into the wallow Xglotl had prepared in the Hilton's spa, "was her enthusiasm as we shopped. Enthusiasm is a religious term, you know. It means that one has 'breathed in' the god. As though we gods were some sort of gas! It's devotion raised to the level of madness. Martian Madness, one might say."

"It'll be raised to another level of madness," Xglotl commented, "when she sees the bill."

"As to that, all the gear she got can be reckoned an investment. She's got her eye on Jimmy. They'll be on a panel together Thursday."

"You're thinking wedding bells? With Jimmy! Lots of luck."

"Stranger things have happened," the goddess said, sliding down into the dark ooze of the wallow. Bubbles rose about her immense girth.

"You haven't predestined anything, have you, Divine Rwng?"

"I know what I know," said Rwng, as she submerged. "And I am that I am."

Jimmy and Pepsi were wed on the very Thursday night of their panel in the Hilton's All-Faith Chapel. Napoleon was their ring-bearer, and little Tartine the maid of honour. And they and all the bridegroom's other clones were coiffed to perfection.

**Thomas M. Disch**, born 1940, eminent American writer since the 1960s, who has contributed to *Interzone* many times in years gone by, and whose brief poem in honour of John Clute we ran on the inside front cover of our last issue, is the beneficiary of two tribute websites. They can be found at: [www.michaelscycles.freeserve.co.uk/tmd.htm](http://www.michaelscycles.freeserve.co.uk/tmd.htm) and [www.csinfo2.liv.ac.uk/~ejal/](http://www.csinfo2.liv.ac.uk/~ejal/)

# Ptaargiu

*Stephen Dedman*

**T**here's always at least one on every ship, and they always come to me.

My study window has a view of the starport, so every time I see a straightliner land, I brace myself for a visit. Sometimes I think travel's become too easy, too fast and too cheap. If the Commonwealth hadn't declared it an inalienable right, if people had to sacrifice something to come to Summerskye, had to spend a few years conscious but bored witless on a slowboat, or had to pay some hard-earned credits, or even if they just had to ask someone's permission, then maybe they'd do some research about the place before packing a bag and grabbing a seat on a straightliner. The ordinary tourists are bad enough, but on every ship that lands, there's always at least one religious fanatic who's heard something about the Ptak and wants to either convert them or follow them... and this time, there were two.

They were both young, 20 to 25 standard, and obviously a couple. Ostentatiously natural-looking, with long brown hair, pale brown skin, muscles suggesting that they'd done some physical work in normal-range gravity, white robes suspiciously like those the Ptak wear, sandals, and no paint or jewellery apart from a small tau cross on a chain around her neck. They were clean enough by local standards, though they probably would've raised some eyebrows on planets where water was cheaper. Still, they looked saner than most of the people who knock on my door, and the woman might have been attractive if she'd done something with her hair.

The man spoke first. "We're looking for Professor Tejada," he said.

"You've found him," I replied. "Come in."

They looked at each other, obviously confused, and I sighed quietly. My wife, Lian, and I wrote many papers together, but we began fighting when we were working on a popular book about the Ptak, and it came out under her name. "My wife left three years ago, with one of our students," I told them, careful to keep my voice even. "I don't know where they went. If you're looking for the university, there isn't one; there's only the museum, a few xen-

biologists and planetologists, and me. Can I help you?"

They looked at each other again, then walked in, but didn't sit. My study is decorated with Ptak artefacts, mostly hunting weapons and copies of their artwork, but apart from that, it looks like a generic office; cyb desk, chair, couch, mini-kitchen, all unashamedly functional-looking and showing signs of wear, but comfortable enough, especially in the low gravity.

"We're interested in the Ptak," he said. "We were hoping to discuss some of her translations with her, and maybe talk with some of the nomads..."

"The jalo won't talk to you," I replied, "and no one will take you to them, or to their cities. If you want to discuss Lian's work, you may as well talk to me; we worked together for several years. Are you students?"

"We're interested in the Ptak's spiritual beliefs," said the man. I was beginning to wonder if the woman could speak. "We've read all the published translations we could find, including yours, of course, but we still have some questions."

I sighed again. "So do I, believe me, and I'm trying to answer some of them now. Do either of you speak any languages other than Inter?"

Most of my visitors look blank at this, but the woman smiled. "Arabic," she said, in oddly-accented Inter. "I've taught Ronen a little, and he's taught me some Hebrew."

I suspect I looked impressed, without intending to do so; I speak both languages, but far from fluently. "Your native language?" I asked her, in Arabic.

"Yes, though I learnt Inter at school," she replied.

"Good." Humans with unmodified vocal cords aren't capable of speaking much Ptaki, even if they have perfect pitch, but a good listener should still be able to understand it fairly well. Most people who come to me wanting to study the language are used to letting translation cybs do all their work for them, which is ridiculous; who do they think wrote the software for the cybs? If they don't have a grasp of how difficult it is to learn even another human language, I won't waste any time on them. I looked at Ronen and asked, in Hebrew, "Where are you from?"

"Cousteau."

"Is that where you learned Hebrew?" At least, I think that's what I said; my syntax isn't entirely reliable.

"No, I started learning it when I was in a kibbutz on Einstein."

"And Arabic?"

"Abebi's been teaching me for the past two years." He looked at her fondly. Well, it's often been said that the best place to learn a new language is in bed.

"Okay," I said, glad to switch back to Inter. "I have work to do, but I'm giving a lecture tonight at the Lyceum, and if you want to discuss Lian's work, or mine, I can see you tomorrow afternoon. Until then, I suggest you spend some time acclimatizing yourselves, and maybe get some sleep. Where are you staying?"

"The hostel on Columbia Street."

It was a common enough answer, and I shouldn't have been surprised. It offered the cheapest accommodation in startown, but in strictly sex-segregated dorms. Either I'd misjudged their relationship, or they were being very frugal with their credits. "Fine. Shall we say two o'clock tomorrow?"

I watched through the window as they walked across the courtyard towards the hostel; a Ptak in a dirty robe approached them, its demeanour suggesting that it was begging. Adult Ptak have sharp beaks, obviously designed for tearing flesh, and three eyes, and stand close to three metres tall with their necks at full stretch; I suspect they find it hideously uncomfortable trying not to look threatening. My study is soundproofed, so I didn't hear it screaming abuse at them as they walked away, but I knew that it was.

The Lyceum seats 200, and is rarely as much as half-full when I give my lectures (unlike the Arena, where close to a thousand tourists go to hear Ptak singing each night). Ronen and Abebi were sitting in the middle of the front row when I arrived; they'd discarded their robes for more conventional shirts and baggy pants, but they still looked incongruous among the painted faces and smart-suits of the tourists.

Someone once defined a lecture as that process by which the notes of the lecturer become the notes of the students without ever passing through the minds of either, and I often suspect I could be replaced by a holomovie – but the occasional unanticipated intelligent question, though rare, justifies the effort. "I'm Ray Tejada," I began. "I've spent most of the past 14 years studying the Ptak language and culture. I also spent much of that time campaigning against having a straightgate built in this system; obviously, I failed. I hope my attempts to understand the Ptak have been more successful, but my main concern has been to preserve their language and culture.

"One of my reasons for doing this is that many human languages have been lost; most lost in that no one but historians and translation cybs still speak them, and some lost completely. Barely six centuries ago, an unmanned probe was launched from Earth bearing greetings in 55 languages. Now, the Commonwealth recognizes only one language for more than a hundred bil-

lion people. A few more have been preserved by religious groups, but many religions have also been lost, no longer practised even on Earth. No wonder that when we finally encountered the Ptak, an alien species with its own language, its own technology, its own artforms, its own religions and ethical codes, everyone was curious – and no one remembered how such a group should be studied without destroying what made it unique. We had to re-learn it, and we made mistakes while we did.

"I hope that all of you are familiar with the concept of the observer effect in science; the best known example is that sometimes the only way to determine the position of a sub-atomic particle is to move it. Please remember this when you look at the Ptak who live here in startown, who speak Inter – the ones who the nomadic Ptak, the jalo, call ptori. Their contact with our language, our ethical code and, perhaps most importantly, our technology, has changed them enormously."

I drew a deep breath, and a hologram appeared beside me, a squat cylinder of fitted stone half buried in the hard soil. "This is a Tower of Silence – what the Ptak call a lektas. You've probably heard of them. When we first saw them, we thought they might be dry wells, or empty grain storage silos, or some sort of military fortification, but we soon discovered that the Ptak throw their dead into them, leaving them to be eaten by megaera, those vulture-like creatures you can see perched about the rim. Ptak medtech is extremely primitive, and it's difficult for them to tell whether a Ptak is dead or comatose, but they trust the scavengers to be sure." I watched people grimace, as usual, then said, "Lektas translates roughly as 'offered to the sky'; 'Tower of Silence' is a human expression. Humans on Earth used to build similar towers for the same sort of purpose, though none of us on the slowboat knew that; it took an historian on Mars to make the connection." There were the usual horrified gasps. "Remember this if you're ever tempted to call the Ptak primitive; it's not very long ago that we were equally primitive. It may be that if this planet were more hospitable, with more water, more land plants, more useful metal near the surface, if it could support the same population as Earth, then Ptak technology might be equal or superior to our own. Remember too, that 'primitive' does not necessarily mean 'barbaric', or 'unsophisticated', or 'natural', or even 'innocent'. Many low-tech cultures on Earth had ideas that the high-tech societies could have adopted to their advantage. For example, in some tribes in Australia and America, it was forbidden for a man to acknowledge the existence of his mother-in-law, or vice versa – something that I suspect many of us wish the Commonwealth had included in the Charter of Human Rights."

I paused to let people laugh, then played them a recording of a Ptak song – a recording of a jalo performance, part tradition, part improvisation, very different from the staged productions they'd hear in the Arena. I also showed them pictures of real Ptak art, not the commercial stuff, and some tools and weapons, and talked for a while about their mathematics and their observational astronomy. No one asked any questions until I'd finished speaking, when Ronen stood. "You said that 'primitive' wasn't the same as

'innocent'. Could you please explain that?"

I shrugged slightly. "This isn't the Garden of Eden," I replied. "The Ptak can distinguish between good and evil, they have an ethical code, but it's a far cry from the Commonwealth's Charter. Most of us would regard parts of it as extremely callous, but to the Ptak, survival of the flock, the tribe, is paramount; the individual is insignificant by comparison. Despite this, though, Ptak are rarely violent towards each other – much less than humans have usually been. Their weapons, well-made as they are, are for hunting; several species have apparently become extinct in the few centuries since they invented the compound bow, but there's no evidence that they've ever used them against each other, or ever fought a war."

I could tell he wanted to argue, but he nodded and sat down.

They both returned to my study the next afternoon, while I was still eating lunch.

"I've been reading Beeson," Ronen said, with almost no preamble. "He says the Ptak believe that everything is made by 'the Creator, who cannot be named,' or Ptaargiu..." He made a creditable attempt at the Ptaki word, then realized I was shaking my head. "Don't they?"

"He's misinterpreted our work," I said, managing to keep my temper. "True, ptaargiu translates as 'the creator,' and also as 'the nameless,' but Beeson took those quotes out of context, either wilfully or out of ignorance. It's usually a euphemism for 'the dead' – the Ptak never speak the names of the dead – or for someone banished from the tribe; outcasts rarely survive long in the desert. It can also mean 'the forgotten' or 'no one remembers,' which is usually true. Ask a Ptak who made the sky, or the planet, and he'll probably tell you ptaargiu... but ask them who built any of their towns, or composed any song, or invented the compass or the bow, and they'll tell you the same. You have to understand that Ptak don't think about the past or history the way we do, and they certainly don't write it down. Their written language is for mathematics, and astronomy, and music – and I mean music, not lyrics. Their traditional ballads are old, sure enough, but every singer changes the words."

"I'd also like to point out that if Beeson ever came here, which I doubt, he didn't speak to any jalo, or I'd know about it. It's possible that he or one of his disciples spoke to some ptori, but ptori will usually tell you what they think you want to hear, especially if they think you have hallucinogens."

He looked crestfallen, and Abebi, who was reclining on the couch, spoke up.

"So you think the Ptak don't believe in any gods?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I'm always cautious about observer effects, and how do you ask someone a question like that without putting the idea of God into their head? I've never figured out a way, and I don't want to introduce an idea like that to Ptak culture if they don't already have it. I've never heard the jalo mention anything that matches our description of God, or gods; the adults are extremely pragmatic, and the young aren't permitted to speak to humans. It could be that one or more of the cre-

ation myths you've read, the ones the ptori tell, are genuinely old... but even if they are, it's much more likely that they're fables, something pouchlings might believe but not adults. I really don't know."

"What about their shamans?"

"The shamans may just be Ptak who go insane, and I don't know how much credence the Ptak give them – though they seem to genuinely respect, or fear, amnesiacs. A tribe with enough food and water will sometimes keep an insane member out of compassion, or as a status symbol, or for some other reason I don't pretend to understand... but most shamans wander off into the desert when things become bad, and become ptaargiu. The ptori here in startown who claim to be shamans are just lucy addicts; they may genuinely believe that their hallucinations have religious significance, but even if they do, they probably just learned that from us. I'm just glad that Ptak can't metabolize alcohol or any of our other drugs."

"Would it be so bad if you did introduce the concept of God to the jalo?" asked Ronen, hesitantly.

"Yes," I replied flatly. They looked at each other again, and Ronen asked, "Do you have the right to make that decision for the Ptak?"

"I don't have to," I said. "The ptori have already decided that they like what we have to offer; the jalo have decided that they don't. If you're here as a missionary, then no one can stop you speaking to the ptori, but the jalo will not listen to you. If you have questions you wish to ask them, tell me, and I will ask those which I think won't harm them."

Ronen shook his head. "You sit here in your ivory tower and treat the Ptak as though they were your own property, as though only you had the right to study them and speak for them... why? What is it you want? Do you hope to learn something from the Ptak? Or do you just want to become more famous than your wife?"

Abebi looked shocked at this outburst, and I hesitated before replying, to take the edge out of my voice. "You can believe that if you want to," I said. "In fact, one of the things about Ptak culture that interests me is their apparent lack of jealousy – sexual jealousy as well as other kinds. I think many humans could learn something from this."

He was silent for a moment, though I could feel him fuming. "We can help you," he said.

I shrugged. "Somehow I doubt that. However, if you have any questions you wish me to ask the jalo on my next trip, mail them to me, and I'll ask those that seem safe." He sneered slightly at the last word, but didn't comment, nor did he show any signs of leaving. "You are, of course, perfectly free to talk to any ptori who will talk to you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"You can't just fob us off like this," he snapped. "We came a long way, and we want to come with you, to talk to the nomads."

"Out of the question," I said. "Even if I were to take you on as my students, it would be at least a year before I—" I nearly said 'permitted', but quickly amended it to, "—took you out to speak to the jalo. If you don't mind..."

He turned to Abebi, his face beginning to redden. "Tell him about Upohar," he said, his voice strained; I wasn't sure whether he was commanding or imploring. Upohar is famed for its mystics, who claim to have psionic powers, and to be able to teach them to those with the talent; I should have guessed that a religion collector like Ronen would have gone there. Abebi shrugged slightly, and said, "We've spent the last two years on Upohar. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes, but I've never been there."

"They test you for ESP – psychometry, clairvoyance, precog... and if they find any capability, they train you." She looked away from me, past the artworks and towards the window. "They wanted me to stay."

Only you?, I thought, and managed not to smile. Ronen was quietly fuming.

"What can you do?" I asked.

"I'm a telepath," she said, touching her tau pendant. "I can communicate with other telepaths, or read the minds of others. Sometimes, when I'm too close, I pick up surface thoughts and short-term memory without meaning to – but they say most people do that, sometimes."

I nodded slightly; that was probably true. The Upohari mystics claim that most of us are born with some ESP, but learn not to rely on it. Telepathy, they say, is a less efficient method of communication than speech; most children use it to learn language, which they soon discover is quicker and less confusing and often less frightening. "How close?"

"I can commune with other telepaths at up to 20 metres, and through stone walls. To read a non-telepath, no more than five metres; the closer I am, the easier it is, and I have to be able to see them."

I thought about this for a moment, and realized I was sitting back in my chair as though trying to put some distance between us. If she noticed, she didn't seem offended. "Why did you come here?" I asked.

She glanced at Ronen, and I didn't need telepathy to know what she was thinking; she'd wanted to stay, but because he was unable to learn anything from the monks, he'd persuaded her to leave. "We wanted to see if I could read the minds of the Ptak," she said. "It was Ronen's idea; the monks had never heard of anyone else trying it."

"And you want to try it on the jalo? Why not the ptori?"

"The ptori understand Inter," she said. "The jalo refuse to learn it – they're the only sentients we know who do. I wanted to see if I could communicate with them telepathically. But I suppose I should try it on the ptori first..."

I nodded. "I think so, too." I glanced out the window; the beggar was sitting in his usual place. "Go out there and see if you can read him." Neither of them spoke. "Ask his permission, if you're concerned about his privacy; I'm sure he'll say yes if you offer him a few lucies. And tell me what you find."

"And if we can read him, you'll take us to meet the jalo?" asked Ronen.

I smiled slightly at the 'we'. "I'll consider it," I replied. "I'll admit, I'm curious too." Not as curious as I was eager to get them out of there, but close.

Abebi stood. "Do the Ptak know about psi?" she asked.

"Their shamans are supposed to be capable of precog and clairvoyance," I said. "I'm fairly sure that's not something they learned from us, though it's hard to be absolutely sure."

"But not telepathy?"

"Not as far as I know. The ptori might have learned about it from us, though as far as I know, no telepath has ever come to Summerskye before."

She seemed to be hesitating, torn between ethics and curiosity, but I was fairly sure which would win, especially if Ronen had a chance to persuade her. They left, and I watched as they walked across the courtyard. The ptori glanced at them listlessly, then perked up as it saw that Ronen was heading straight towards him, with Abebi following more cautiously. I almost wished I could hear the conversation. After a few minutes, Ronen set out for the vendor across the street, while Abebi remained, standing two or three metres from the beggar, obviously uneasy while he regarded her with his central eye. Ronen returned holding out a packet of lucies, which the ptak eagerly grabbed. Abebi stared at him, then screamed and ran. Ronen glanced at the ptak, then up at my window, then followed after her. The beggar ripped the packet open and eagerly gobbled down one of the capsules inside.

Startown is small enough that the comnet doesn't see much use, even for mail; most people prefer to visit and talk face-to-face, and if net access wasn't considered a basic human right, I suspect we wouldn't have bothered with it. Despite this, I wasn't surprised when a small holo of Abebi appeared above my desk later that evening. She hadn't bothered with a vanity filter, and her face still looked slightly blotchy with emotion. There was a blank wall behind her, and no sign of Ronen; she was probably in a booth in the hostel. "Can I please talk to you?" she asked.

It took me a moment to find the command for the camera. "Go ahead," I said.

"Why do the Ptak hate us?" she wailed. "I read the mind of that beggar, and the hatred... I don't understand it! How have we harmed them? We haven't killed any of them, or enslaved them, or taken their land, or anything else from the planet..."

"I know. We've been careful not to do any of those things; that's one of the things that makes the situation unique in human history," I said dryly. "We've even managed to give them a choice as to whether or not they want any contact with us."

She flushed slightly at that. "You haven't answered my question."

"I don't have a simple answer," I replied. "I'm not sure there is one. I suspect that part of the problem is that we don't actually treat the Ptak as our equals, simply because their technology is so far behind ours and their population so low, and because all of our methods of measuring intelligence are culturally biased. We've been careful not to give them weapons, we don't know enough about their biochemistry to give them much in the way of medicine, we've told them about other planets but never taken them to any—"

"We can't," protested Abebi. "They couldn't survive in a full gravity – could they?"

"Probably not; their hearts are quite efficient, but most of their bones are hollow. They could survive on Mars, but I doubt they'd enjoy it. Unfortunately, it's not easy explaining this to them, especially when you have to make sure it doesn't come over as a threat. As I said, there may not be a simple answer – and a simple answer may not be a good one."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at what the Commonwealth has done to human culture – one law, one language, one economic system. Yes, it's reduced conflict and prevented wars, and every human on every planet is adequately fed and housed and educated... but at a price. More than three quarters of Commonwealth delegates have been male, and they made deals with the religious groups on some laws to buy their vote on others. That's why the only form of marriage recognized in the Commonwealth is between one man and one woman, with the woman and any children taking the man's name, and divorce and adultery taboo. I know, men can marry men, or women, women, on Wilde or Sappho, but it won't be recognized on other worlds. Are you and Ronen married?"

She shook her head. "Engaged."

Something in her tone told me it had been a long engagement; Ronen was probably too proud to marry her after she'd succeeded where he'd failed. I decided to change the subject before she started asking about Lian. "The Charter was also influenced by concerns of the time, which is why there are so many laws to safeguard privacy. I'm not saying it's wrong or that I'd change it, it's what I'm used to, the same way Christians became used to eating fish on Fridays; I'm just saying it isn't entirely logical, and it could have been different. The Ptak have a very different attitude to privacy. A lot of the Ptak culture is based on the flock, the tribe; it works because tribes mostly stay together, and everyone knows everyone else, so keeping secrets is difficult. They have almost no crime, because it's almost impossible to get away with it. They have no marriage, and no way of proving paternity – I hope they didn't learn the concept from us, but it's possible – so any child is a child of the tribe. But this works partly because banishment from the tribe is almost certain death. Do you think a culture like that would survive if anyone could just get on a straightliner with no questions asked and go anywhere, just disappear? Or even if we gave them genescanners, so the males could determine the father of any pouchling? I'm not saying their way is wrong or right, but they have the right to choose for themselves."

"Ronen thinks there's a lot we can learn from the Ptak," she said. "You must, too, or you wouldn't have stayed here this long."

I shrugged. "That's true, but I suspect our aims aren't the same, nor our methods. My main interest is in the Ptaki language, the only non-human language we've ever had a chance to study. Ronen seems more interested in finding a religion he can believe in – or in starting one."

She was silent for a moment. "Don't you think that's

a worthy goal?"

"That's not for me to decide. I'm looking for students, not a Messiah."

"Professor Cheung told us that you haven't had any students since your wife left," she replied.

"I know; the last one ran away with her. Since then, I've been much more careful who I trust. Goodbye."

I didn't hear from either of them for more than three months, and I was foolish enough to think that they might have left the planet without telling me, until I found a large file in my mail. It was titled *Testament of the Ptak*, by Ronen Haise; the acknowledgements page gave thanks to Abebi Carello, Professor Lian Tejada, and Professor Maria Cheung. Maria, the xeno-zoologist from the first landing party, was an old friend; I called her and asked what she knew about the book. "I've just received my copy," she said. "It looks like a first draft – at least, I hope it is. I took Haise around the museum, but he seemed more interested in the Ptak culture, so I suggested he talk to you. He said he already had, and that you regarded the jalo as your personal property, so he was talking to the ptori instead. I thought that was a little unfair, but I just assumed the two of you had rubbed each other the wrong way. He had the same effect on Suni, who manages to put up with me, so he must be Hell to live with; I don't know how his fiancée stands it." I grunted. "I haven't read much of the book," she continued. "We just came back from a dig. Why don't you come over for dinner? We haven't seen you in – it must be more than a year, now, and my students would love to meet you."

"I've been busy."

"Who hasn't? But we haven't all become hermits. And when was the last time you took a sabbatical, or even a vacation?"

I admitted that I couldn't remember, agreed to come over for dinner the next night, and clicked off. The book was an easy read, long on theological speculation but short on proof and new ideas, and I finished it in little more than an hour. The ptori had mostly told him what they thought he wanted to hear, but many of the alleged quotes were obviously fabricated; words that no Ptak could have pronounced in Inter, and which the cyb wouldn't have translated in that way. I was also misquoted – not my published work, which he rarely cited and never acknowledged, but our conversations. He portrayed me as exploiting both the jalo and Lian for my own fame, which is ridiculous: the urge to grab one of the Ptak weapons from my study walls and go looking for him was almost overwhelming, and I lay down on the couch until I thought I could speak civilly. The holo appeared above my desk a few minutes early; I probably should have ignored it, but I was too angry. "Yes?"

"Good afternoon," Ronen said smoothly. "Have you read my book yet?"

"Yes," I replied, as levelly as I could. "Quite entertaining, as a work of fiction."

He flushed slightly. "It's only a first draft. We were wondering whether you'd be willing to write an introduction and help me with the rewrite."

“What?”

“It’s up to you,” he said. “People are going to read it anyway – you know how many read your wife’s book – but you can help make it more respectable. I’d like your help writing a chapter about the jalo, too, and if there’s any material you think needs correcting –”

“Just a little,” I snarled.

He shrugged. “I would rather have had your help from the beginning, but you didn’t cooperate. Look, you should approve of what I’m trying to do; you’re the one who keeps saying that the Commonwealth has suppressed other ways of thinking. I’m trying to introduce people to another way of thinking.”

“If you really believed what the Ptak taught,” I said, “you’d take your name off the book; they know that what’s important is the work, not the creator – but that would defeat the purpose of the exercise for you, wouldn’t it?”

I could tell that that had hit the mark, but he recovered. “Maybe that’s one of the things helping to keep them primitive,” he replied. “But I’ve done one thing you haven’t.”

“What? Fabricate evidence?”

“I’ve listened to the ptori, and treated them as people, with something to say that’s worth hearing,” he snapped. “They’re trying to choose desirable elements from human and jalo culture to come up with a culture of their own – one that might be better than either. You just think of them as outcasts, and assume that they’re always lying to you. They don’t, not if you talk to them for a while. Have you ever done that?”

I didn’t answer. There was enough truth in that to make it sting. We stared at each other’s images for a few seconds. “I didn’t have a telepath to help me,” I said, a little lamely.

“Yeah, well, it would’ve taken a lot longer without Abebi,” he conceded grudgingly. “What do you say?”

I still wanted to say “no,” but I hadn’t quite cooled down. “I need some time to think about it.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding unconvinced. “I’ll call you again in a couple of days.”

Dinner with Maria and Suni was a minor ordeal – like most of the crew, they’d been more Lian’s friends than mine – but I survived it. On the way back to my apartment, I was stopped by a ptori beggar asking for lucies. I was about to refuse, as always, but I stopped. “Why?” I asked.

Three dull green eyes stared at me. “What?”

“Why do you want them?” I asked. “What do you see when you take them?”

She seemed to think about this, straightening her neck slightly as she did so, and clacking her beak slightly as though tasting something. Her tongue quivered. “Anutter...” then stopped, as her vocabulary let her down.

“I understand your language,” I assured her.

“Anutter Summerskye,” she said, in clacking Inter. “Annutter...”

“Another planet?” Summerskye is moonless, and there is no Ptaki word for “planet”; until we arrived, this was the only world they knew. “Another world?”

“Ess!”

It might have been something Ronen had taught her to say, but there was no way of knowing, not now. It was a good answer anyway. I gave her the drugs.

I mailed Ronen late the next night, to say that I’d write an introduction to the book in exchange for some changes to the text, but that I wasn’t going to take them to talk to the jalo. He called back early in the morning. “Why not?” he demanded. “What are you trying to hide?”

I stared through the window, watching a straightliner coming in for a landing. “Hide?”

He grinned. “You got something wrong, didn’t you? Or made it up? Or were the jalo lying to you? Whatever it is, it must be bad.” I didn’t answer.

“Is that why your wife left?” I hit the disconnect button, and, not satisfied with that, pulled the plug out of the wall. I was still furious a few minutes later when someone knocked on the door. “Go away,” I growled.

“It’s Abebi,” she said. “Can I come in?”

“No!”

“Please? Ronen isn’t here.”

“Tell your fiancé,” I said, coldly, “that you’re not going to change my mind, either.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. “He’s not my fiancé any more,” she said. “He’s my husband. We were married last week.”

“Then you can both go to Hell.”

She opened the door – I’d forgotten that I hadn’t locked it, I rarely do – and slammed it behind her. “What is it with you two?” she asked, as she strode up to me until her face was less than a metre from mine. “If you could work together, you could really do something for the Ptak and for yourselves, maybe even for everyone else... but no, you both have to start pawing the ground as soon as you see each other. Why?”

I bit my lip, and reminded myself that I wasn’t angry at her. “We disagree on a lot of things... but you’re right, there’s more to it than that.” I remembered the way Joss, Lian’s last student, and I had taken an instant dislike to each other... and the strange smile on his face when Lian had told me she was leaving. As luck would have it, it had been in this room, with the walls lined with Ptak weapons, and before I’d realized what I was doing, I’d grabbed a barbed belly spear and rammed it into his chest.

If I’d been thinking clearly, I could have called the medics and maybe saved him... but I was too angry to think. And when Lian screamed at me, I’d planted my foot on Joss’s chest and pulled the spear out (no easy task, because of the barbs; it probably did more damage coming out than going in) and stabbed her as well.

I looked at Abebi, saw the horror on her face, and realized that she’d read my mind. I should have just let her go – a telepath’s say-so isn’t evidence – but instead, I grabbed the first weapon to hand, a large knife, and plunged it into her throat. I’m not even sure I realized it was her, and not Lian, until she stopped moving. I stood there staring at her; then, when it was much too late, I started thinking.

Disposing of the body would be easy enough, once I’d gotten it downstairs to the skimmer; I only had to take it

to the lektas and let the scavengers dispose of it, as I'd done with Lian and Joss. Of course, Lian had helped me by dropping hints to our friends that she was leaving, and while some of them had wondered why she never returned to Summerskye, no one had ever accused me of anything worse than being so busy with my work that I'd failed to see the obvious. Abebi's disappearance would be more difficult to explain... but I suspected that only Ronen would worry very much about it. And if I told Maria that I was taking that vacation she'd suggested, no one would think to look for me, either, for at least a month.

I moved Abebi's body into the bathroom while the cleaning robot dealt with the bloodstains. Her clothes went into the recycler; her jewellery I vaporized with a lasercutter. I waited until after nightfall to try moving the body; apart from the risk of being seen, most of the scavengers on Summerskye are most active after sunset. I called the starport to ask when the next ship was leaving, and was pleased to hear that it was taking off just after ten, leaving me plenty of time.

The lektas was only a few klicks south of startown; the ptori still used it, and some ghoulish tourists wandered around it and took holos, but fortunately no one was there when I arrived. I hauled the corpse inside, then returned to the skimmer to wait. The megaera arrived within minutes; I could hear them squabbling inside, and I wondered why anyone had ever called them "towers of silence." Irony? Or because the people who used them would always be silent? In a way, that was even more true on Summerskye than it had been on Earth; not only were the dead silent, their names would never be spoken again by anyone.

Sometimes I admire the Ptak their ability to forget the dead, just as I admire their lack of jealousy. Of course, I thought, as I watched the scavengers descending, we could be wrong about that. Perhaps the Ptak sometimes kill their rivals. Perhaps they've even had wars, and simply erased the victims from history more effectively than we've ever done. Just because I hadn't found a word for "war" in their language doesn't mean they've never had one. And maybe one of the reasons humans have been more inventive is a striving for some form of immortality, an urge to be remembered... Don't misunderstand me, I doubt that Sappho or Wilde or even Einstein sat down at their desks in the expectation that planets would one day be named for them... but I'm not saying they don't deserve them, either.

The megaera took less than an hour to reduce the body to splintered bones, utterly stripped of flesh. The insects would take care of those, but I'd have to do something about the skull. Nothing else in the known universe is shaped quite like a human skull, and evolution on Summerskye hadn't developed ivory teeth. I walked into the lektas with a rockhammer and a lasercutter, frequently looking back towards the doorway. There was no door that could blow shut and trap me, but that's what I half-expected to happen, just as I had last time. Instead, I finished the job without any interruptions, returned to the skimmer, changed my clothes again, and reached the

starport with ten minutes to spare. I was sure that Ronen must have come looking for Abebi by now, and I didn't think I could fob him off until the next ship.

The starport was staffed by robots, not humans; I didn't see anyone I knew, and no one stopped me, except to scan my luggage. Maybe someone would remember that Abebi hadn't caught the flight, but I doubted it. A human attendant welcomed me on board with a grin. "Nervous about flying?" she asked, sympathetically.

I realized that I was sweating, and nodded. "I have some tranquilizers, if they'd help."

"Thank you," I said, sincerely, as she pointed out my assigned seat. I slumped down into it, and took the offered pills as the door closed and I heard the antigravs start up. I'd caught straightliners before coming to Summerskye, but I remembered them being bigger and more glamorous; this felt more like a tour bus. I knew there were sleeper compartments behind us, but they cost credits, which would leave a trail, and the trip wouldn't be long – ten hours to the straightgate, ten hours from there to the next planet. I realized that I'd never asked where the liner was going, and turned to the woman sitting next to me. "Where are you headed?" I asked.

"Home," she said, and smiled. "Upohar." A look of concern crossed her face as I blanched, and I saw the tau cross around her neck as she reached for my hand reassuringly. "Are you okay?"

I don't know who began screaming first, but she was the one who insisted they land the ship back on Summerskye.

I pleaded guilty, to save Summerskye the cost of a trial; I knew that Maria was sure to find some human remains at the lektas, probably enough to geneprint. I was fairly sure of what the sentence would be; house arrest for at least 30 years, and no rejuvenation treatments, which means I'll probably die here. Unfortunately, I hadn't expected Ronen to be given a chance to speak to the judge. Thanks to him, as well as the house arrest, they've also started erasing my name from history – specifically, from all the papers and software I wrote. Most of them are being attributed to Lian, even though I did most of the work.

I've replaced the window in my study with a holoscreen that shows the lektas south of town. I'm not allowed any monument, but at least they let me choose how my body would be disposed of, and that's where I picked.

I was able to extract a small revenge on Ronen, though; it's not much, but I know it pisses him off. All the papers I write from now on are being attributed to Abebi Carello. I hope she'll be remembered when he's ptaargiu, like me.

Ptaargiu.

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Stephen Dedman's previous stories for *Interzone* were "A Single Shadow" (issue 131), "The Lady Macbeth Blues" (issue 148) and "Ravens" (issue 164). He lives in Perth, Western Australia, and has a growing reputation based on his stories in Australian and American magazines and his two published novels to date (both from Tor Books, USA).

In the memorable words of a Science Museum security guard directing Ian Watson to the toilet last year, the Clarke Award presentation on 19 May was at the far end of Space. It had outgrown the usual lecture theatre and moved to the deep blue yonder of the Wellcome Gallery, with a light-show of messages and graphics jittering along the far wall and even underfoot. All six nominees were present: Octavia Butler, Mary Gentle, Ken MacLeod, China Miéville, Alastair Reynolds and Adam Roberts. Sir Arthur himself manifested through the miracle of video as a talking head against a background of his own books, only patchily visible through the crowd since the display, though large, was at floor level. After the usual speeches, the newly increased £2001 cheque went to a grateful China Miéville for *Perdido Street Station*.

## Journey of the Sorcerer

**Douglas Adams** (1952-2001), world famous for *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, died of a heart attack while exercising in a California gym on 11 May. Hugely popular as a humorist, journalist and advocate of high technology, he received obituary coverage in British media far beyond the ordinary lot of an sf author. Surprisingly, initial reports from the BBC in particular betrayed amnesia about *Hitch-Hiker* having begun as a BBC radio series. The inevitable touch of Adamsian numerology was that over the weekend following his death, Amazon.com's sales ranking for the US paperback *Hitch-Hiker's Guide* was for a short while 42.

**Brian Aldiss** travelled to Macedonia to receive the "Vision" Award from its SF Centre: "I'm sorry to say this is the first award I have received this year."

**Margaret Atwood's** *The Blind Assassin* was shortlisted for the UK's women-only Orange Prize by its female jury. But it seems there's also a male jury that picks its own shortlist, whinges in public about the women jurors' "lily-livered deference to dull or soppy books by big name writers" (*Guardian*), and calls *The Blind Assassin* an "overblown, inflated piece of sci-fi – probably the least interesting book she had written."

**Terry Gilliam** recently told a correspondent: "Tony [Grisoni] and I may have actually finished a sufficiently good enough draft of *Good Omens* to start moving forward with the business of making it."

**China Miéville**, standing for Parliament as a Socialist Alliance candidate, joined a mass protest at the 2 May Kensington & Chelsea council meeting

## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

(opposing plans to close a local day nursery) and was singled out to be "pinned down by six cops with a knee in my back," handcuffed, and hauled bleeding from the council chamber, before protesting parents and Labour councillors insisted on his release. Suspicious-looking folk, these novelists.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Science Corner.** Another classic problem solved, according to the *Annals of Improbable Research* (May/June 2001): "Quantum Gravity Treatment of the Angel Density Problem" by Anders Sandberg. Modern physics tools yield a solution to the classical problem of how many pins can fit on the head of an angel." Someone tell Clive Barker...

**Sidewise Awards** shortlist for alternate history: LONG Suzanne Allés Blom, *Inca*; Mary Gentle, *Ash: A Secret History*; S. M. Stirling, *The Nantucket Trilogy*. SHORT Eugene Byrne, "HMS Habakkuk" (*Interzone* 155); Ted Chiang, "Seventy-Two Letters" (*Vanishing Acts*); Paul J. McAuley, "A Very British History" (*Interzone* 157); Kim Newman, "The Other Side of Midnight: Anno Dracula 1981" (*The Vampire Sextette*); Carla Pereira, "Xochiquetzal" (*Altair* 6/7, trans David Alan Prescott).

**R.I.P. Morton Klass**, anthropologist, writer, and brother of Philip Klass ("William Tenn"), died on 28 April. He published several sf stories, including a 1961 collaboration with Avram Davidson. *Simon Raven* (1927-2001), prolific British satirical novelist who unashamedly used vampire and supernatural themes in his books *Doctors Wear Scarlet* (1960), *The Roses of Picardie* (1980) and *September Castle* (1983), died in London on 19 May. He was 73.

**Mythopoeic Award** fiction finalists... Adult: Win Blevins, *ravenShadow*; Charles de Lint, *Forests of the Heart*; Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Sarantine Mosaic* (both vols); Midori Snyder, *The Innamorati*. Children: Dia Calhoun, *Aria of the Sea*; Rita Murphy, *Night Flying*; Donna Jo Napoli, *Beast*; Laurel Winter, *Growing Wings*; Jane Yolen, *Boots and the Seven Leaguers*. The nonfiction titles tend to be far longer, for example *The Crisis and the Quest: A Kierkegaardian Reading of Charles Williams*. I'd love to read or maybe even write *The Lion, the Will and the Superman: A Nietzschean Reading of C. S. Lewis*.

**As Others See Us.** "Suspect all sci-fi fans come from the Planet Glob." – Ed Perkins (*Bournemouth Daily Echo*, 12 May), subtly finessing his inability to write a coherent review of *Revelation Space*.

**Spectrum Awards** shortlist for sf/fantasy dealing positively with gay issues: NOVEL *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon; *The Chosen*, Ricardo Pinto; *A Face Without A Heart*, Rick Reed; *The Jazz*, Melissa Scott; *Jumping Off The Planet*, David Gerrold; *Kirith Kirin*, Jim Grimsley; *Teranesia*, Greg Egan. • OTHER *The Authority: Under New Management* (comic); *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (tv); *A Distant Soil*, Colleen Doran (comic); "Oracle," Greg Egan (short); *Queer Fear*, ed. Michael Rowe (anthology).

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept of Subtle Understatement.* "Then it [pain] entered him with power: into his eyes, down his throat, in through his nose, his ears, ripping open his rectum and jamming up the length of his shriveled penis, forcing into him with howling lust; it filled him to bursting, swelling him from within, stretching him thinner and thinner like a weather balloon expanding toward destruction, while it dissolved and digested his guts, his heart, lungs and bones, everything within the stretching membrane of his skin. His eyeballs expanded, threatening to burst from his face, to explode from the pressure that built within them. • He screamed in pain as he squeezed his eyelids shut, trying to keep his eyes in their sockets by sheer strength..." (Matthew Stover, *Blade of Tyshalle*, 2001) *Dept of How to Recognize the Marquis de Sade.* "Only his hands betrayed the disguise – white and plump like a pair of corpse-fed spiders, ornamented with a dozen costly jewels like the glistening bodies of dead insects. Despite the well-tended softness of the skin, the nails were black and ragged, as if eaten away by unspeakable vices." (Andre Norton & Rosemary Edghill, *Leopard in Exile*, 2001)

# www.cyber-whore.com

*Ashok Banker*

The first call of the day came when she was in the kitchen, pouring milk over Neetu's Frosties. Neetu was singing out "More, Ma, more," tapping her spoon on the edge of the bowl with that self-mesmerizing absorption peculiar to five.

Her hand shook slightly as the customer selected his option. He wanted a blowjob and some russian. She spilt milk on the table mat. Neetu grumbled – and then promptly dropped a spoonful of soggy Frosties in her own lap. Jay sniggered from the other side of the table. A fight broke out.

"Quiet, kids," she said, but too softly to be heard over the high-pitched voices. Her knees felt wobbly.

She set the milk carton down on the linoleum top and sat down. The customer forced himself on her. She touched her chest, trying not to let her revulsion show. Take it, you brown bitch, he sent, yanking her hair back. Please, slowly, she tried to say, and almost choked on her words.

"Mum? Mum?" Neetu shook her hard enough to make her head flop. "Jay, look, Mum's spitting."

"That's not spitting, dumbnut, it's dribbling. Mum, you're dribbling again."

She struggled to tell the kids to go into the other room, then remembered that they were supposed to be having breakfast. Somehow, she got to her feet, manoeuvred her way out of the kitchen, through the living room, and into the hall toilet.

She locked the door behind her and slumped to the floor, unable to make it to the bowl. She puked up her morning cup of tea, and the mashed dregs of a single unbuttered toast. The customer roared. I love it when you do that when I'm coming, honey, he sent. The sharp pun-

gent odour of semen stung her abraded passage. She slapped a palm against the wall of the bathroom, her cheek fever-hot against the cold porcelain tiles.

Leclaire was in a meeting when she dialled him up. Or so his Mook said.

"Would you like to leave a message, AsiaB-321?" the Mook asked in Leclaire's Korean drawl.

She hesitated. "Just tell him to call me."

She dialled up Sunny, who didn't respond for almost eight or nine seconds. When he came on, impatiently, she got the impression he was naked. "What?"

"I need you to take the munchkins. For the weekend. I'll keep them all next week."

"Shalini, no way. Tomorrow's Diwali weekend. I'm going up to the bungalow. You know that."

"Take them along. They love the hills."

"You can't do this to me. I have a life. I've got plans."

She tried to probe around his embed. The pleasure centres. "Who are you going with?"

He paused. "No one. For the love of Ganesh, don't start with the guilt thing."

"Who is it, Sunny? That himbo you were brainfucking that night in Club Cybermed? The night we were supposed to be trying to patch things up. For the kids' sake. Remember?"

He bristled. "I don't need this shit now. Don't be a bitch. You're the one who's a pro, remember?" He smeared the word in her face, slapping a reverb and double-echo on the end: ember... ber...er...er.

"Sunny, you bastard, you're using sfx now? On me?" She felt like giving him a taste of her electric dill, straight up the... But caught herself in time. This was the father

of her children.

"What do you want me to say, Shalini? Okay, so I was mentally intimate with someone else while we were in bed, while we were supposed to be patching things up. But you knew and I knew, and we both knew that we both knew that it was a going-through-the-motions thing. For the kids. Besides, I'm out of flesh now. I've turned."

"Completely?" she asked, unable to believe it.

He nodded. Or the virtual equivalent, whatever that was. "I'm going One Hundred next week. I'm on the schedule at Gandhi Memorial."

"God, Sunny, do you know what you're doing? I mean, this is a big damn decis—"

"Yeah. Farewell to the flesh and all that crap. Shedding the mortal coil. Yeah, I'm sure."

He paused, and for an instant there, she was sure he was with someone, virtually if not physically. She sensed a masculine presence, muscle and lust. "I joined the Hubbards."

"Scientology?" Somehow, this shocked her even more than his decision to go One Hundred. "But, Sunny, you were the one who always said—"

"Look, I can't talk, okay? I really have to go, you caught me at a bad time."

"—about the kids?"

"Okay, okay. But this is the last time. In any case," he shrugged in cyberspace, "after I go One Hundred, things will change. You haven't got them Embedded yet, have you?"

She didn't answer that. "Sunny, I want you to think about this carefully. Going One Hundred is no joke. You remember what happened to Josephine and K-Y-nir? Living hell. Some people aren't meant to go totally Virtual. You've always been in touch with your physical side. You used to love to swim, remember? You used to love the feel of water on your body. You'll never feel that again if you go One Hundred. Wind on your face? Fingertips tracing the curve of a breast?"

He smiled. Or whatever. "Been there. Done that. Besides, you're forgetting, Shalini. It's all in the box. That's where we really feel. There's no difference between V-sex and the real thing any more. Hell, V-sex is the real thing. You probably heard about this political group, the V-people? They're campaigning to ban all physical interaction."

"Fanatics. They don't know what they're talking about."

He paused. She received with a surge of surprise that he supported the group, had in fact voted for them in the last election. "Maybe. Look, I don't want to talk about this any more, okay? Do them a favour, get the children Embedded. It's free now, in case you didn't know. They even get 500 Hours on the Sega V-net as a bonus."

"What happened to lollipops?" she sent, sarcastically.

"I'll pick them up later this afternoon. Twoish. And you don't have to make up next week, I was planning to take them along for my One Hundred procedure. It's good for them to see how simple and painless it really is, clear the cobwebs of gossip. Our responsibility to guide them to a better life."

He dialled off before she could get a last word in. She held onto the line a few seconds longer, listening to the signal/noise/interference. It sounded like the voices of people howling at the bottom of an endless stone tunnel. Like the well in her great-grandma's house in Goa, where she'd spent the summer she turned 13.

A customer logged on when she was in the car, driving the kids to school. They were arguing in the back seat about who could make the scariest faces. It was a couple who wanted a threesome. The woman wanted her to do the man with a vibro-dill while she went down on her. They were both overweight, a hundred, hundred fifty kilos each. Their flesh wobbled gelatinously as Shalini did and was done to. Their combined weight crushed her as she was parking the car, and the woman bit her hard. Her foot was still on the accelerator and she pressed down on it involuntarily, stomping the brake at the same time. The car lurched forward once, twice, thrice, coming within millimetres of a kindergarten boy. His V-book clanked softly against the fibreglass hood ornament of the car. In the back seat, the kids oohed and aahed.

"Mom, you're losing it," Jay said as he got out.

"What's she losing?" Neetu asked. Shalini heard him reply as they went into the school together: "She's cracking up, yaar. Dad said it happens to people who stay flesh too long."

The kindergarten kid's mother came sprinting up and picked up her son. She glared furiously at Shalini through the windshield, then gave her the finger with the familiar awkwardness of the recently Embedded. Thanks for a great time, the couple sent. Here's a little bonus for a job really well done. She received the additional tip into her MasterCard account with a numb detachment that was frightening even to her.

It was only after she reached home and was peeing that she realized that the woman had drawn blood.

"Tell him I'm quitting," she told the Mook. It was sitting at a Virtual replica of LeClaire's desk, peering through his bifocals. It was the most clichéd look of the moment, the sophisticated elder corporate type. It screamed Pimp to everyone but LeClaire and she had told him so a dozen times, but if he had the good taste to understand, he wouldn't have adopted the look in the first place, right?

"What do you mean, quitting?" the Mook replied, frowning intellectually at her, fingers interlaced delicately. "Do you mean you're going One Hundred? Because you should know that your contract specifically stipulates—"

"No. I am not going One Hundred," she sent, tired. This was the third conversation she'd had with the Mook today. "I'm just quitting. Period."

"You're quitting your period?" the Mook asked, genuinely puzzled now. "A partial turning? Only removal of the reproductive organs?"

"Screw you," she sent, and logged off.

She downed two analgesics, paused, then swallowed a third. Washed them down with fresh orange juice. Frozen

fresh orange juice. She tried to read a book. Not a V-book, she hated those glassy screens with the thumbpad you kept caressing to scroll the pages up. A real book. Paper and ink. She opened it, deliberately cracking the spine. The paper was thick and had a vaguely sandy grain. She sniffed it and a forest flashed in her mind, lunging pines, leaves, moist soil, birds. Turning the pages was comforting. The elegant serif type calmed her down. In minutes, she found herself breathing more easily, her nostrils clearing. It was a collection of poems by the early 20th-century poet, Rabindranath Tagore. *Gitanjali*, the book for which he'd been awarded the Nobel Prize, the only Indian ever to win for Literature.

The words rose off the page in gentle, redolent waves, wafting up to her. She breathed them in deeply, feeling her pores open to receive the words, her synapses passing the impulses on joyfully.

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into  
fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards  
perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-  
widening thought and action –  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my  
country awake.*

There were six or seven of them, all jamming through the same V-terminal. They were all high on legal drugs – or on illegal alcohol – she couldn't tell which. And they were availing of the special Happy Hour 20% Discount on The Gangbangers Fantasy Option #23. Which was the Hogtied Special. She was bound between two trees with a combination of ropes, chains and leather straps, suspended in the air.

She sent No, Excuse me, This Operative is not available, please try another operative. But they were already into it, one thin reedy teenager mauling her viciously. Please Stop, she sent at maximum volume and pitch, This Operative is not available. They laughed and one of them sent, Hey, that's good programming. You can scream as loud as you like, honey, there's nobody within ten megs, sorry, miles. Besides, he added as he ripped off his leather jacket, virtually, You're the first CW who sounds like you know how to do a gangrape scene. Scream, baby, scream.

After the fourth one, she gave up trying to convince them and tried to relax and just get through it. When the pain grew unbearable, she clenched the arms of her couch hard enough to rip the upholstery. But she didn't scream, she made damn sure she didn't give them that pleasure.

"I don't understand," the technician said, smiling sweetly. "You want your EmMod modified?"

She sighed. "Listen to me, you dumb bitch. I've been trying to tell you for the past ten minutes, I don't want it modified, changed, upgraded, serviced, or anything. I just want it yanked out, pulled out, removed, trashed. Understand?"

The smile vanished. So did the technician. A moment later, the Manager of the Medimart appeared, polite but very cautious. "There seems to be some misunderstanding," he began, without apology. "That procedure isn't possible any more."

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you have an EmMod 99, am I right?"

"So?"

"The EmMods 99 through 01 are partially organic."

"What do you mean, organic?"

"They're designed to integrate themselves with the User's biology. Both the software and the hardware. So if we try to remove the chip implant from behind your ear now, that might get it out physically. But it will disrupt whole areas of your functioning."

"I don't understand. It's just a little chip with an InfraRed modem. So you can dial-up and connect to the WWW directly, wirelessly. Now I want it removed. How can it 'disrupt' anything?"

"You haven't been following the Senate Committee Hearings?" he asked.

"You mean, in the USA? No. I barely have time to keep up with the local Bombay news."

He shrugged disapprovingly, as if unable to fathom how anybody could be unaware of what was happening on a minute-to-minute basis in the land of stripes and stars. "It seems the manufacturer deliberately designed the EmMod series to be irreplaceable. So people couldn't remove them and shift to rival brands. That's why they're facing the Senate Committee Investigation. It's a Restrictive Practises violation."

"It's a violation of my body," she said. "I don't give a damn about the Restrictive whatever. Just tell me this, can you get this crap out of me or not?"

"We don't have the insurance coverage for that major a procedure. You'll have to try a full-service hospital. There's a Colgate Palmolive up the street." He called out after her as she turned to go: "But I wouldn't count on it, if I were you."

The hospital was called the CP Happy Health Centre. She'd never been able to figure out why they couldn't just call it a sponsored hospital, that's all it was. People died in here too, same as anywhere else. Unless they went One Hundred, in which case they could live virtually forever. That brought a little grimace to her face: virtually forever! At least she still had her sense of humour.

The Health Care Officer at the front desk handed her a sheaf of forms and charged her a registration fee without even listening to her enquiry. "You have to register first," she said. Her name tag said Arundhati. She filled out the forms, paid the fee, then was told to sit in a lounge with 50 or 60 other outpatients. The first seat she was about to sit on had a suspicious smudge of reddish brown ochre, so she chose another one, between a fat

teenage girl with an equally porcine mother clutching her hand possessively on one side and an ancient withered old South Indian on the other. The old man looked dead. His skin, dark though it was, had the bloodless look of old parchment. A faint wheezing sound was the only indication that he was still breathing. After a few minutes, she realized he was snoring gently. She picked up a magazine and waited.

"They eat you."

She spasmed, dropping the magazine, then realized it was just the old man. His eyes were still closed, his breathing still slow and gentle, but he'd stopped snoring. She looked around. Nobody else seemed to have heard him. She picked up the magazine again and leaned out to replace it on the table.

"Seventeen times thirty."

She looked at him again. "I beg your pardon? Were you talking to me?"

His eyes opened slowly, as if the effort of raising each lid was like hefting barbells. His pupils were brown, warm, friendly, and, she realized with a shock, the eyes of a child. He looked at her for a moment, opened his mouth to wheeze out a long, shuddering breath, then smacked his lips unselfconsciously. "You'll do."

She looked over at the nurses' station, sorry, Health Care Desk. The HCOs looked as indifferent and polite as ticket-counter salespersons at a bus station. In a way, they were. What else was this but the ultimate bus station?

"But if you hold the bit tight between your teeth, you can shake them off sometimes."

She glanced at the old man again. "I'm sorry, are you talking to me?"

He sniff-snorted. "Ain't nobody else here but you."

She looked around. He was right. The fat mother-daughter pair had left and the nearest other person was a dazed looking man with a white shard of bone sticking out of his forearm. She straightened her skirt, uncrossing then recrossing her legs.

"You're one of those," he said, wheezing faintly. "CWs."

She looked straight ahead. "I beg your pardon?"

"I know," he said. "I know the look. And you wear too many clothes. And the way you walk, you're still more flesh than implant. Yup," he coughed once. "You're a cyberwhore."

She turned slowly to look at him. Those eyes again, playful, innocent, mischievous. "I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

He grinned. His teeth were gone, just one stump on the top front row that she could see. It was chipped. His tongue slicked over it, caressing it. The action had the look of an instinctive, frequent habit. She looked away.

"What's your URL?" he asked.

She didn't reply, didn't look at him.

"Don't get so mad, I'm not a customer."

She debated shifting a few seats to the left. But the bone sticking out of the man's arm terrified her. He seemed stunned by his own pain, unaware of the blood coagulated on his hand, around the wound in a thick treacly jelly, and on his shirt and trousers. She stayed

put.

"You're an EmMod 99, ain't you? Want to get it out of your head, right? Can't stand it any more. Customers taking you when you're not ready for it, when you want a little privacy, when you're with your kids or your husband, or even your mother. And your pimp doesn't give a shit as long as you keep billing your optimum amount. You've probably tried calling him about a dozen times and keep getting his Mook. So you thought you'd come here and get it yanked out, and to hell with the whole damn shit-pile."

She felt a light patina of sweat break out on her face and throat. "Who are you?" she asked.

He didn't reply for a moment. She heard his breathing, slow, rhythmic, laboured. Like the hissing of a lung machine.

"They eat you. Piece by piece, they consume your sanity. And at the end, when you're beyond caring, when you're not a human any more, not flesh, not those God-cursed creatures who call themselves One Hundreds out there, then, you know what the worst thing is? Do you really want to know?"

He leaned forward, and she should have jerked back, or got up and walked away but didn't. She was hypnotized, unable to prevent herself from listening to him. His breath smelled foul, like the odour of real meat she'd brought home once, back before they made it illegal, like the way that slab of undercut veal had smelled after she'd left it out overnight unrefrigerated. Sickly sweet, nauseating. He wheezed out a choked laugh. "The worst thing is not that you can't stop it any more... but that you learn to like it. To crave it. Need it. Because finally, at some depraved level, it's human contact. It's flesh against flesh, skin to skin, body to body. Not just this cyber-nonorganic bullshit that's taken over everywhere. And that's when you know, you're just meat."

Her arm jerked. She stood, hesitated a second, then began walking. She walked out of the CP Happy Health Centre and into the street. In a minute, she had caught a cab and was on her way home.

It took her a while to realize that he had been one too. Just like her. That was how he knew what it was like. Then she wished she had asked him how he got out – if he got out. She went back to the hospital and looked for him, but he was no longer there.

LeClaire called. "You've not been billing up to par recently," he began reproachfully.

"I want out," she said. "I've had enough."

He smiled, stuck his thumbs under the straps of his suspenders. He looked dapper as a cybermodel on GQ-Line. "You know the agency doesn't approve of mid-year raises. But maybe I can arrange an advance against the Diwali bonus. Which, as you probably know if you've been scanning the half-yearly financial results, is going to be pretty decent. 60% of net annual billing, in fact."

"I don't want more money. I want out. Now. And I want this thing out of my head."

He steepled his fingers. Such a cliché, like in those old 1990s American movies. Wall Street tycoon, Michael

Douglas in any one of a dozen roles. Arrogance and superiority tempered with elegance and a dangerously quiet voice. "That's not possible."

"What the hell are you talking about?" She was walking the room now, going around in circles. Ice tinkled in the glass in her left hand. "We have a legal contract. I have an out clause. Three months notice or a cut in accumulated bonus or whatever. I'll take the cut. Just do it."

He plucked an invisible bit of lint off his cuff. "I'm afraid it's a lot more than that. There's a new ruling. On the Scientology Versus Hare Rama case."

"So what?"

"So the Government of India just ruled that all citizens with less than 50 percent implants will not be entitled to insurance cover, state-sponsored medical aid..." He spread his hands. "Etc."

She put the glass down, splashing gin and tonic. Her head ached. "So what does that mean in Indian English?"

"It means, Shalini, that you should toss that liquid toxin down the kitchen sink. And get yourself an appointment to go One Hundred. Your contract has a special stipulation that allows for that." He beamed proudly. "Your net will triple. And your accumulated bonus doubles. Now, that's a hell of a raise, right?"

"You bastard, why don't you get it through your pimp brain that I don't give a crap about the money any more. I just want out of this sick profession. It's starting to get to me physically. I was bleeding the other day."

His smile had vanished. "You're entitled to medical."

"Screw medical. Screw the agency. Screw the contract. I'm switching off. That's it. I quit. You can go do what the hell you like." She logged off.

She was still recovering from the gin bender the next morning when a strange sound jangled jarringly through the apartment. She staggered to the front door. Sunny, dressed in a kurta and churidhar, an ash-teeka on his forehead, looked at her reproachfully.

"You've switched off," he said. "I've been trying to get through since yesterday."

She went over to the Sony Virtual Immersion Couch and found a cigarette remaining in the pack she'd stashed there the night before. He came in and sniffed disapprovingly. She knew the room stank of gin and vomit, but he probably couldn't identify the smells.

When she lit the cigarette, he balked as if someone had just set off a grenade. "Ram Ram," he said, touching his chest. "This is worse than I thought. Do you know those things are illegal?"

She took a long, deep drag and exhaled smoke in his direction. He backed away, flapping his arms. "Shalini, you need help. Let me call a Health Care Centre."

"How's your himbo, Sunny? How do you like him to do it to you? In the ass? Or do you two just hold hands and fly through cyberspace together?"

He blinked. "I should call an ambulance." He sniffed the air, understanding belatedly. "You've been consuming alcohol. Ram Ram, I'm going to have to send the kids for therapy."

"I never drank in front of them. Or this." She waved

the half-smoked cigarette. "I wish I had. I wish I'd done a lot more. At least that way, they'd have lived a little. Not just been plugged into some virtual version of reality."

He edged toward the door. "I'm calling the Health Care Officers. You need help."

She forced herself to wind down, to dampen the seething anger bubbling up like molecules of air trapped in her blood, struggling to break free. Stubbing out the cigarette, she moved toward him. He backed away, almost at the door. She ran her fingers through her hair, trying to compose her face into a semblance of a smile. "Sunny, stay a while. Talk to me. We used to be good together. We had sex. Physical sex. Don't you miss that sometimes? And we went sailing once, remember? On the sea."

He wrinkled his nose. "It was full of faeces," he said.

"Yes, but if you looked out at the horizon, not staring too closely at the water, and if the light was just right, and the wind not blowing your way, then it almost looked like the ocean in those old films. Almost... romantic?"

Her voice cracked at the end. Gin and nicotine did take their toll; and her throat was still raspy from that last hogtied special.

"You need help," he said, shaking his head sympathetically. "I'll keep the children. I'm taking them along for my One Hundred tomorrow. If they like what they see, they might even opt for it. There's a special incentive scheme for families." He paused. "If all four of us do it together, we get unlimited free cruising in Kerala." He looked at her with a smidgen of hope.

"Kerala," she said. "I'd love to go there. The real Kerala. Not some virtual God-of-Small-Things Tour. The real place. By train, or bus, or even by car. We could drive up there, spend a few days, the people are so friendly, they put you up in their houses and feed you for free. Sometimes, if you offer them payment, they get offended."

He shook his head. "You probably scanned some obsolete travel guide. Now, I receive, there's this chain of Holiday Inns. And Ramada. And a couple of Indian hotels too. Taj, I think."

She went on, ignoring his comments. "I want to ride an elephant, climb a coconut tree, wash a buffalo in a river... I want the mosquitoes, the bugs, the heat, the humidity, the red earth, rain on my face, diarrhoea, the smell of raw bananas being fried, the indescribable satisfaction of urinating on mud, scratches from low-hanging branches, to stub my toe on a rock while wading in the lake, I want your semen inside me on a cold night, your sweat dripping into my mouth, salt and sin." She gasped, out of breath. "I want to live! To live! Is that too much to ask for?"

But he was gone, the door swinging shut without even a rusty creak.

She laughed. "You fool, you sick fool, you scared him away." She never broke down and cried, but she kept feeling she ought to.

Later that night, sozzled stiff on the last of the overpriced gin, she logged on for the first time in two days and tried

to dial up the kids. Their connections were busy, and she almost logged off, out of fear that a customer might cut through in the few seconds she was on-line, but then she used a shortcut to break into their space. Jay was deep into a 44-player linked game of Monster SpaceTruck Madness, plummeting through a black hole at metawarp speed. She popped into the shotgun seat beside him in the Tata-Toyota. "Hanuman!" he said. "Mom, you scared the shit out of me. Look at that, I lost my lead!"

"I need to talk to you," she said, speaking slowly to avoid slurring.

He raised his hand to slam against the control panel, then folded his arms on his chest. "I was going to make a new time record."

"Go on, son. You want to release that burst of anger, do it. Hit the control panel! Do it!"

But he just unwrapped a Brainy Gum and began to chew on it methodically. "Dad said you were sick. Going to hospital."

"Jay, sometimes we seem sick but we're not really. We're just taking a break from being healthy. It gets so monotonous sometimes, good health, you know." She glanced at him. He was staring out the windshield at a meteor shower. "Jay, I know mummy hasn't been herself lately. I've been acting strangely, losing my temper at you more than I should, not spending enough time... You've been a good elder brother to Neetu, and I love you for that. But I want you to know that there's a reason why I've been acting so strangely. Before someone else tells you some warped version of the truth."

He shrugged. "You're a cyberwhore and you're burned out."

She felt a ripple of shock course through her. "Who told you that?" She realized the answer was obvious. "It was Daddy, wasn't it? Well, that pukeface doesn't know his own dick from a cyberdildo, so—"

She broke off, realizing he was staring at her. "Jay, I didn't mean that." She paused, fought to calm her breathing, and tried again. "Mummy's having a lot of trouble at work. I'm trying to quit. But if I do that, then I won't be able to earn enough for us to buy the things we need to live comfortably. So I'm trying to find another job. It may pay less to begin with but—"

Hiya, ho, are ya ready to party?

No, not now! She tried frantically to log off, but it was already too late. Payment had been registered. It was a FemDom Vintage with the Male Torture+Neo-Nazi Double Discount 2-for-the-price-of-1 Option. Even as she tried to hold onto the connection with Jay, she felt herself transform into the persona of a shaven, fluorescent-face-painted, leather-and-rusty-spike-clad Nazi wielding a genital crusher in one hand and an electric punisher in the other. Jay was staring at her curiously. "No," she sent, her voice echoing off the glass walls of the SpaceTruck cabin. "No!"

But it was too late. Even as she succumbed, she felt a flush of shame heat her face and neck. Not in front of my son! The SpaceTruck cabin melted and gave way to a concentration camp interrogation room set-up. "Jay, log off!" she sent. But even as she was sucked into the cyber-fan-

tasy, she felt his presence there, watching her wide-eyed.

You bastards, she sent. What sort of world is it if I can't have control of my own mind? She swam in an ocean of pain and orgasm. She tried to de-immerse, forcing herself to feel her own body lying on the bed back in the apartment. She called up the memory of the gin: sweet, sour, acidic. She called up memories of vomiting, constipation, brushing teeth, clipping toe-nails, the time she'd cut her thumb on the edge of a—

If you hold the bit tight between your teeth, you can hold them off.

She gritted her teeth and bucked. The customers – there were more adding on every second, 14 so far and still counting – laughed and roared approval. One of them wanted her to castrate him, another was begging her to insert a red-hot needle at the exact moment he orgasmed. She focused on the old man back at the hospital, the way his breath had smelled, the stench of rotten beef, real beef, live flesh. She felt the needle turn into a flower, the testicle-crusher into a scarf, her leather-and-rusty-spikes outfit into a paisley-patterned silk saree. She felt the confusion of the customers. She received anger and disapproval from another source: Le Claire. You bastard, she sent. I quit.

Your resignation was rejected, he sent. Under Clause 223 (e) of the bylaws, you're required to continue fulfilling your duties as a citizen and a gainfully employed member of a legally recognized industry. Your bonus has been approved.

She found the point at which the EmMod 99 interfaced with her consciousness. Saw the minute filaments that had insinuated themselves into the fleshy matter of her brain. She saw how much a part of her it had become. How much a part of it she had become.

She tore through the filaments, ripped through the joints, disconnected, destroyed, destroyed.

The pain was unspeakable.

She was in Kerala, riding an elephant. The elephant was old, strands of grey hair matted on its coarse, leathery hide. The sun was warm on her bare shoulders and back. Too warm; she would get burned soon if she didn't apply SunBlock. She didn't have SunBlock. She didn't care. Birds flew past, close enough to touch, swooping through the fronds of coconut trees. The river flowed to the left, curling ahead into an infinity of lush, green tropical bush.

A group of children ran beside the elephant, dark-skinned, white-smiled Keralite children dressed in little lungis, shouting in Malayalee, splashing through rain puddles left from last night's monsoon showers.

Behind her, clutching onto her back, Neetu said, "Mummy, can I stand up? Please, I want to stand up and walk on the elephant!"

She laughed. "Neetu, you can't walk on an elephant, but—"

She swung her daughter around, holding her beneath the shoulders. "How's that?!"

Neetu squealed happily. The elephant thumped around a coconut tree bent at an impossible angle.

As they went past, Jay snatched at a coconut. The

branches shuddered, slapping water in her face. "Mum! I got a coconut!" She laughed.

AsiaB-321, do you receive? This is your employer contacting you. Please log on immediately.

She set Neetu down on the elephant, one hand gripping her around the chest. With the other hand, she nudged the elephant towards the left, towards the river. The children yelled deliriously as the animal carried them into the flood-swollen grey-brown water. The elephant trumpeted briefly, paused to find its bearings in the fast-flowing water, then trudged stolidly onwards. The sound of the children shouting faded behind them. Neetu sang happily.

Attention: This programme has performed an illegal operation and must be shut down immediately. Please contact your local service provider for assistance.

Shalini, you have to come back. You can't—

Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my children awake. She was singing the words, not in English but Bengali, even though she didn't know Bengali. But it sounded right to her ears, sounded like the sweet singsong cadences of her mother's voice, sitting on the verandah in Old Alipore, Calcutta, singing Rabindra Sangeet, the songs of Rabindranath Tagore.

AsiaB-321, you are in violation of your contract. You are in danger of being terminated with penalties and complete erasure of all accumulated bonus. This is your last warn—

The elephant reached the far bank and lumbered up onto the mud shoulder. There it shuddered, flipping its ears.

Neetu screamed with pleasure, sticking out her little hands. "It's raining!"

The rain was cool, gentle, and faintly scented. Shalini raised her face, opening her mouth, shutting her eyes. The sound of water on the bush was a steady shirring that gave rhythm and body to the song in her mind.

She sang on, opening her eyes, her mouth, opening herself to the rain. She drank the rain. It was as sweet as nectar. She drank greedily of it until her belly was full and swollen. Even above the song of the rain, she could hear the children laughing.

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**Ashok Banker** first appeared in *Interzone* with "In the Shadow of Her Wings" (issue 166). He lives in Mumbai (Bombay), India, and is a much-published writer in his home country, where he has written for books, magazines, newspapers and television. His stories are just beginning to appear in the west.

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# The Whisper

*Zoran Zivkovic*

**I**t was a small class. And special.

There were only five youngsters, three girls and two boys, their ages ranging from six to eleven. Dr Martin had his hands full with them, but in one respect at least they gave him no worries: he had no need to discipline them. Peace reigned unchallenged in the classroom. It was so quiet that at times Dr Martin actually longed for a little commotion, some kind of unruly unrest. But all he received from his wards was silence.

They sat silently at their low desks, physically present but mentally absent, detached – worse than that: unattached. They were wrapped in an almost impenetrable autistic shell – certainly, one with no shortcut leading through it. Were there a path, to trace it would require endless patience, heroic kindness and attention on a grand scale – not that even these could guarantee success.

Although he liked to regard himself as a teacher, Dr Martin was truly no such thing. He never taught his pupils anything; nor did he test them, or even talk to them. He did address them, of course, but he could never be certain that they took in any of his words. There was rarely any reaction; when there was, it was enigmatic.

Even so, something was emanating from those five closed, inaccessible worlds. It was hard to understand, but at least it existed. When Dr Martin had first given the children blank sheets of paper and pencils, he had done so with no great expectations. It was simply part of the standard programme. First he had shown them how to use the pencils, which took a wearisome time. Even more time and persistence had been required to persuade them to use them for spontaneous self-expression. The final result was certainly disproportionate to the effort it had cost, but this was true of every aspect of work with these children.

Ana, the oldest but also the smallest in the group, with a face dominated by extremely large eyes, was the first to master the skill of freestyle drawing on paper. She held

the pencil in a white-knuckled grip, but her movements were quick, short and nimble. She filled sheet after sheet, but Dr Martin never saw any of her productions. Should he approach her as she drew her densely cross-hatched lines, she would quickly turn the paper over to prevent him from looking at it. When she decided that a drawing was finished, she would start to tear it up. She did this with geometric precision, first in half, then in quarters, and so on until her desk was piled with tiny squares of grey confetti. These she would carefully sweep into the pocket of her smock, taking them with her at the end of class. Dr Martin never learned what she did with them.

Sofia was a plump nine-year-old with a round, pimply face which she bent over the desktop because she was very near-sighted. She drew only on the edges of the paper, leaving the middle untouched. She filled this narrow frame with curving lines of surprising accuracy. They were snaking waves, spirals and open loops that never crossed or touched each other, creating a complicated tangle reminiscent of fingerprints. She would interrupt her work occasionally and stare for a long time at what she had drawn. In the end she would hand her work to Dr Martin with a grimace in which he thought he recognized a shy smile.

Alex, a tall, thin ten-year-old with unruly hair and glasses that were usually halfway down his nose, didn't draw anything. He scribbled over the paper with broad, nervous movements, helter-skelter, until there was not the slightest bit of white left. Then he would turn the paper over and continue on the other side. The sides of his hands were constantly smudged with graphite, and he often broke his pencil. Once filled, the papers no longer interested him. He would push them aside or crumple them and throw them on the floor. He paid no attention when Dr Martin came to pick them up.

Maria was a dark-skinned, slightly cross-eyed girl of eight with a harelip. She always flinched when Dr Martin gently addressed her, and never changed pieces of

paper. From the beginning she had drawn the same complicated design in which a certain regularity could be discerned, although nothing was recognizable. She worked slowly, spending considerable time on details which she constantly embellished, while adding new ones. Sometimes she would mutter, quietly and inarticulately, as if talking to someone in the drawing whom only she could see. During the two months that the drawing class had lasted, she had filled barely half of her first sheet of paper.

Philip, the youngest pupil in the class, had weak capillaries in his nose, so from time to time his nose would bleed spontaneously. If Dr Martin was slow to notice this, a red spot would spread over the paper in front of the boy. Philip was not bothered by the blood and paid no attention to it; he was completely devoted to his unvarying work of drawing endless rows of little circles on both sides of the paper. His hand was unsteady so the rows were rarely horizontal, and the little circles would gradually get smaller or larger, often distorting into ovals. He would put the completed sheets on the side of his desk next to the blank sheets, paying no attention to Dr Martin should he take any of them away.

The drawing programme did not call for music, but did not preclude it either. Dr Martin reached gratefully for the idea, once it occurred to him, as relief from the oppressive silence to which he could never acclimatize. There could surely be no harm in some quiet but tuneful composition. It might even have an invigorating effect on his pupils. One never knew – although, of course, one should never allow one's hopes to become too buoyant.

The choice was biased. Dr Martin brought his favourite CD from home: Chopin's second piano concerto in F minor, opus 21. It had the effect of a sedative, although not in the least like those that rendered you numb and insensitive; rather it was calming, making one tranquil and receptive to those vibrations of reality that one might easily miss in an ordinary mood.

When he listened to Chopin alone at home, Dr Martin always closed his eyes. That would be improper here in the classroom, but a twinge of disappointment got the better of him. He watched the children for a few moments after the concerto started, secretly hoping for some sort of sign that they were at least aware of the sound of the piano and orchestra, but there was none. The five youngsters sat there, engrossed in their usual drawing, as if their ears had been plugged with wax, as if completely untouched by the harmony that so enchanted the teacher. Dr Martin had been plagued by doubts about his work before; there had been moments when it seemed archetypally futile. But he had never before plumbed the depths of such despair. He closed his eyes to remove himself from the scene, if only for a moment.

The first movement, maestoso, was already well under way by the time the music at last suppressed the rising tide of rancour within him. He realized that he was actually being unfair to his unfortunate wards. He had greatly overestimated them. Of course they were insensitive to Chopin, just as they were to many other, far less complex joys freely available in the world from which they had withdrawn. It could not be otherwise, as he should have

known. He should not have expected miracles.

He opened his eyes and looked at the children in front of him. There was no change: the same bodily positions, the same movements of five pencils on paper. He put out his hand to turn off the player. He could have let the concerto play to the end, for it wasn't bothering anyone, but it suddenly seemed senseless for him to go on listening to it by himself. Yet his finger never reached the stop button; just then he noticed that there had been a change, after all. And he was to blame. Had he not closed his eyes, irrationally and improperly, for several minutes, he would have noticed Philip's nosebleed.

By the time his rapid strides brought him to the boy, almost one-third of the sheet, tirelessly filled with little circles, was stained red. It was a distressing sight, though it represented no real danger. The bleeding could easily be stanched by inserting a piece pulled from a cotton-wool ball into Philip's left nostril, and Dr Martin always kept a supply to hand with just that in mind. The young boy did not object. He obediently put his head back, as so many times before, and patiently awaited what came next.

After wiping Philip's mouth and chin with a tissue, and mopping up the remains of the gushing blood, Dr Martin picked up the damp paper and wiped off the desktop with another cotton ball. Then he took a new sheet from the pile in the corner and put it in front of the boy. He was just about to crumple the paper and throw it away when his eyes strayed briefly to what was written. The red film covered something which should not have been there at all.

Dr Martin had never even tried to teach his young pupil how to write numbers. It simply would not have been worth it. Even normal six-year-old boys have trouble with them, and it was out of the question for autistic children of that age. Nonetheless, here was a long row of numbers, covered by the blood from his nosebleed. There was no interruption to set them apart. The circles suddenly stopped and numbers appeared in their place. Three rows of numbers once again gave way to little circles, except that now they all looked like zeroes. The numbers were not written very skilfully either, but they were easy to recognize, even so.

Dr Martin looked in amazement at the boy, but he was once again absorbed in his endless drawing of round shapes, as if nothing unusual had happened. The doctor stood over the boy for a moment, holding the sheet of paper which was starting to curl from the dampness. Then, guided by a sudden thought, he started to check on the other children.

But there was nothing unexpected there. Ana, as usual, turned over her paper when he got close, with a reproachful, sidelong glance. Sofia stopped her slow drawing of a thin, sinusoidal line along the very edge of the paper, raised her head and smiled at him, more with her eyes than her mouth. Alex was making broad sweeps on the paper, scribbling with his already dull pencil, completely indifferent to Dr Martin's scrutiny. Finally, Maria first flinched a little when he came up, and then shyly returned to the details of a design that vaguely resembled a bird with an oversized beak.

Returning to his desk, Dr Martin reached for the player again, but once again he changed his mind at the last moment, and left it on, although he could not have said why. The maestoso ended and the second movement began: larghetto. He placed the sheet of paper he had brought in front of him on the desk and stared at it, while the music wrapped him in its spidery web.

A little later he took a blank piece of paper and copied over Philip's three rows of numbers, then put the original in a drawer. There were 32 of them, and they seemed to be strung together quite randomly – at least he could discern no pattern, but numbers had never been his strong suit. Maybe someone more skilled in mathematics could make some sense out of them, although he thought not. The very fact that the numbers existed was inexplicable enough. Anything more would be a true miracle.

As a sober man, Dr Martin did not believe in miracles; nonetheless, after class ended that day he e-mailed a mathematician friend with the list of 32 digits from the bloodstained paper, asking whether they might mean something. He was certain of receiving a negative answer, but he still needed confirmation. As he waited, he felt like someone who, in spite of being completely healthy, has mild anxiety regarding the results of a recent medical checkup.

Two hours late he received a reply.

Dear Martin,

It didn't take me long to figure out this was a trick question. The problem has nothing to do with mathematics, of course. The series has no numerical pattern, but it has great meaning in physics – at least, the first nine digits have. If you put a decimal point two places before the first seven, then you get 0.00729735308, which is one of the fundamental values of nature, the fine-structure constant. I don't know about the digits after the eight. If they weren't given at random, to confuse me even more, then it must be God himself who whispered them to you because at this moment only He is able to measure after the eleventh significant figure.

You surprised me, I must admit. I had no idea you were interested in theoretical physics. Working with handicapped children must be boring you rigid, if you have to seek refuge in riddles like this. Try thinking up something harder next time!

Isaac

Dr Martin thanked his friend for his quick reply. He praised his quick intuition, and admitted contritely that he was, indeed, a bit bored. Of course the numbers after the eight were arbitrary. How could it be otherwise? He had truly underestimated Isaac in thinking they could have fooled him.

Dr Martin's conscience caused him not a twinge for hiding the truth in this way. At present it was out of the question to reveal the true origin of the numbers. He would be obliged to offer some sort of explanation, which he was not prepared to do for a number of reasons, principally that Philip would be exposed to unnecessary unpleasantness thereby. The boy's well-being came first,

and he would be unable to withstand a multitude of unknown people wanting to examine him. He would only withdraw more deeply into himself, so that nothing would be achieved. If anyone was to get involved in the matter, there could be no one more suitable than Dr Martin himself! There would be time for others later, should that prove necessary or desirable.

He first had to establish what had brought the boy to stop drawing little circles all of a sudden. If that impetus had come from the outer world, then it must have been the music. Nothing else had interrupted the daily routine in the class.

Once again Dr Martin brought the CD with Chopin's second piano concerto and played it at the same level as before. This time he didn't close his eyes. He watched Philip carefully, but nothing happened. The uniform row of zeroes did not change into anything else. The same thing happened when Dr Martin sat through the whole first movement with his eyes tightly closed, feeling rather idiotic as he did so. He had never been tolerant of actions based on superstition.

Then he considered trying a new composition. For all he knew, the piano concerto worked only once. This assumption did not sound very rational, but he had little choice, other than to give it all up. Of course he could not do that! He brought his large collection of CDs into the classroom and started to play them one by one.

Nothing had any effect on Philip, but there were some unexpected influences on the other children. During Ravel's suite no. 1, "Daphnis and Chloe," Ana started to tear her completed drawings into long, thin strips, instead of tiny squares. Bach's toccata and fugue in D minor brought tears to Sofia's near-sighted eyes, but also a sort of coughing that resembled a throaty laugh. During Mozart's symphony no. 40 in G minor, Alex picked up a pile of scribbled papers and put them neatly on the side of his desk. Finally, at the sound of Debussy's Nocturne, Maria failed to flinch when Dr Martin came up to her.

All of this could have been pure coincidence, of course; Dr Martin had no time to check them out because his attention was completely focused on Philip. When he had exhausted his own collection of CDs, he briefly thought of borrowing or buying some others in order to continue the experiment, but thought better of it. He realized it was senseless, since he could go on like that forever. No, he should not have gone beyond Chopin. The second concerto was of utmost importance, but not just the concerto. There had been something else. But what? And then it dawned on him. The blood, of course! Philip's nose had bled!

This was something he could not precipitate. He had to be patient, but he knew from experience that he would not have to wait long. The boy's weak capillaries broke once every two weeks or so. He had to be ready when it happened the next time. He continued his normal work, but he often looked in the little boy's direction, waiting for the thin red stream that would flow from his left nostril.

When this finally happened, he reacted at once. He pressed the button on the readied player, and the classroom was suddenly filled with resounding piano music. Then he went up to Philip, squatted down next to him

and watched him fixedly. The flow of blood first went over the double curve of his lips and then made a winding cut across half his chin. The boy did not stop, even when red petals started to blossom about the paper in front of him. The irregular circles came steadily, one after the other, not changing into digits, while a damp red veil spread over them.

It was only when blood had covered a good half of the paper that Dr Martin finally snapped out of his trance. He leaned the boy's head back with trembling movements and applied a large, white cotton ball to his nostril. All of this had been not only senseless, but extremely unkind to Philip. A doctor, of all people, should be the last person to show such cruelty towards the boy. As he wiped his face with a tissue, he felt his conscience prick him with an almost physical pain.

Dr Martin went back to his desk and turned off the player. The room sank into silence, but no one paid any attention. He should not have played the music, not only because it was superfluous here, but because it had brought nothing but trouble. There had been even less reason to make a second attempt to penetrate something that was clearly way beyond him. If it had truly been a whisper, as Isaac had said in jest, then it had certainly not been intended for his ears.

Moreover, Dr Martin was just an ordinary specialist in autistic children. His main obligation in that capac-

ity was to protect his wards. The best he could do for Philip at this moment was to forget the whole incident, to pretend that nothing had happened. This wouldn't be hard to do as there was only one trace, which would be easy to remove.

Dr Martin opened his desk drawer. He took out the sheet of paper whose wrinkled third had long since lost its bright red colour, turning dark brown. With slow movements he tore it into very tiny pieces. They were not as uniform as Ana's confetti, but they too ended up in a pocket, soon to be discarded in a place where no one would ever find them.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Totic  
Translation edited by Christopher Gilmore

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**Zoran Zivkovic** lives in Belgrade, Yugoslavia (but is not the same person as a minister of like name who serves in the new, post-Milosevic government there). He runs the small Serbian publishing company Polaris, and last appeared in *Interzone* (issues 152 to 161) with a cycle of six stories collectively entitled *Impossible Encounters* – and so published as a little book in his native land. The above piece commences a new cycle of subtly interconnected fantasies – *Seven Touches of Music*. His other books include the four-part novel *Time Gifts* (published in English by Northwestern University Press, USA, 2000).

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Signature

It is, apparently, a form of science fiction that most members of the science fiction community are determined to ignore. In listings of "Books Received," *Interzone* once exiled such items to a special section derisively headed "Spinoffery"; *Locus* acknowledges them in compilations of forthcoming and published books but never reviews them. These books are never nominated for awards, never mentioned in interviews, and never analyzed by scholars, despite their wide visibility and undeniable popularity.

I became acquainted with the subgenre at its birth, when I purchased and read the first two *Star Trek* novels, Mack Reynolds's juvenile *Mission to Horatius* (1968) and James Blish's *Spock Must Die!* (1970). Both novels were the work of respected science fiction writers who had repeatedly demonstrated the ability to write involving, innovative, and at times brilliant stories. Both novels easily qualified as the worst pieces of crap their authors ever produced.

In the 1980s, when Pocket Books transformed *Star Trek* novels into a major industry, other examples of the form were added to my collection, almost invariably as gifts from well-meaning friends who knew that I liked science fiction and, therefore, knew that I liked *Star Trek* novels. I read several of them, but it didn't matter whether they were written by prominent award-winners, diligent craftpersons, or unknowns; they were always terrible. Vonda N. McIntyre's *Enterprise: The First Adventure* (1986) tells the contrived, meandering story of Captain Kirk's first mission, a humiliatingly trivial chore which, of course, soon blossoms into a genuine crisis. J. M. Dillard's *Star Trek: The Lost Years* (1989), purportedly intended to describe what happened during the five years between the final episode of the original series and beginning of the first film, moves at such a snail's pace that it ends up barely covering the first year, as if Dillard was hoping to develop her one-book deal into a tetralogy. Jean Lorrah's *The Vulcan Academy Murders* (1984) is an inept murder "mystery" in which the perpetrator of the crimes all but steps forward and confesses in the first chapter. The last one I started reading was a *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel by Esther M. Friesner, *Warchild* (1994). Surely, I thought, if any writer could infuse a *Star Trek* novel with some originality and sparkle, it would be Friesner. Wrong. It was so insufferably dull that I couldn't

# The Novels Science Fiction Readers Don't See

*Gary Westfahl*

even force myself to finish the thing.

Commentators have attempted to explain why these novels are regularly unsuccessful despite the impressive talents that sometimes labour to produce them. My personal approach to an explanation would invoke a Rule of Three. Most great works of literature are products of one author, one dominant creative force. Yet classics may also emerge from the interaction of two dominant creative forces – not only co-authors, but also an author wrestling with the legacy of some previous author or tradition, or an author with an energetic editor functioning as collaborator. But true artistic achievement becomes impossible when, as is the case with *Star Trek* novels, three creative forces are involved: first, Gene Roddenberry and all the other producers, writers, and actors who helped to develop and shape the original series and its successors; second, the editorial advisors who closely supervise today's novels to ensure that continuity and consistency are rigorously maintained; and third, the credited author, haplessly vying for some wiggle room in a doubly-binding straitjacket. Authors can work well within a pre-existing narrative framework, and they can work well under tight editorial supervision, but both forces acting together are an absolutely deadening combination. The *Star Trek* universe has been compared to the collectively generated mythologies of past civilizations, which inspired many masterpieces;

but, then again, no editors were telling Homer and Sophocles what they could or couldn't do with the characters of Ulysses and Oedipus.

With hundreds of *Star Trek* novels in print, and new ones appearing every week, I may be overlooking some remarkably excellent works within the subgenre. Still, based on my random samplings and other reports, my suspicion that they are uniformly execrable is reasonably well grounded, and I cannot motivate myself to further investigate these texts in my limited time for leisure reading.

At this point, you may think you know where this argument is going, and you may be wrong. Consider precisely what I have said so far: I reporting reading several *Star Trek* novels and regarding them as awful; I described some examples in fairly scathing terms; I announced a resolve to read no additional works of this sort; and, if I am ever asked to recommend some good science fiction books, it's easy to deduce that I will not suggest any of these novels. However, consider also what I have *not* said: I have *not* said that these novels are *evil*, and I have *not* criticized or condemned the innumerable people who read and enjoy these novels.

Others have viewed the phenomenon of *Star Trek* novels with great alarm, particularly vexed by this question: why are so many people reading this *bad* science fiction, when there is so much *good* science fiction out there that cannot garner the wide audience it deserves? Two answers have been advanced: first, that these people are simply unaware that better reading material is available, leading to various proposals to educate and uplift these lost souls – perhaps we could pressure Pocket Books to staple copies of Nebula Award-winning stories in the middle of *Star Trek* novels to let readers know what they are missing; second, that devotees of these novels are hopeless clods, Fans Who Aren't Slans, high school dropouts who read *Star Trek* novels while picking their noses, guzzling cheap wine, and watching wrestling matches on television. I find neither theory persuasive, largely because I have met, over the years, any number of people who admitted, with visible embarrassment, to reading *Star Trek* novels, and they generally impressed me as intelligent, literate persons, well aware that better science fiction novels exist and per-

fectly capable of appreciating them.

Why, then, don't these people seek out those other novels and appreciate them? Because there is no reason to expect that they should.

**U**nderlying the frustrations inspired by *Star Trek* novels lies, I suspect, the false belief that there exists some Royal Road to Superior Reading, and that maturing readers will naturally make their way through some neat hierachal progression, beginning with juvenile science fiction novels, advancing to *Star Trek* novels as a key transitional phase, then continuing onward to David Weber and Lois McMaster Bujold, then to Ken MacLeod and Joan Slonczewski, moving higher and higher up the aesthetic ladder until they finally achieve the Empyrean heights of appreciating, say, Gene Wolfe. If a number of readers are visibly stalled in their upward progress at the low rung of *Star Trek* novels, it means that something has gone horribly wrong, demanding corrective action or vigorous censure.

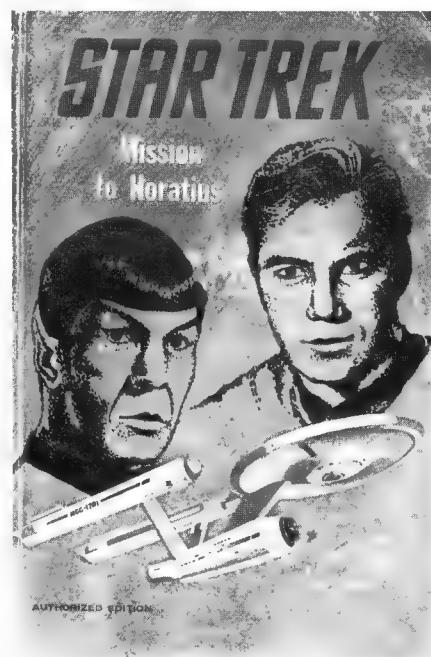
There are two problems with this model. First, readers never follow such rules in their evolving reading habits; over the years, they will careen from bad to good and back to bad again. The model is further based upon the hidden assumption that literature represents people's only available source of intellectual stimulation, so that if readers are settling for monotonous, formulaic fare like *Star Trek* novels, they are regrettably depriving themselves of the rewardingly complex narratives that they desperately require in order to continue growing as active, productive individuals.

But this isn't true. People can get all the intellectual stimulation they need without ever opening a book – by listening to fine music, examining outstanding works of art, watching memorable films, or attending plays, ballets, and operas. Beyond artistic genres, others may focus their energies on learning about and working with other people, who can be just as fascinating as a book. Assembling an effective team to accomplish an important task, or advancing a worthwhile initiative through convoluted layers of bureaucracy, is genuinely stimulating and rewarding, just like reading *Dhalgren*.

The larger issue is this: people should have the right to assemble the mosaics of their own life, gathering bits and pieces of disparate experiences and influences into a whole which they find satisfying, and their individual mosaics will inevitably involve certain amounts of treasure and certain amounts of trash. And we should trust people to make their own decisions about the treasures and trash they bring into their lives without passing judgment,

without assuming that their failure to appreciate our favourite pastime means they are boors. In my own case, while endeavouring to display some discrimination in my reading, I hardly limit myself to the very best the world can offer in most areas of imaginative endeavour, opting instead for routine products that appeal connoisseurs in those areas as much as *Star Trek* novels appeal experienced science fiction readers. Most of the music I listen to is on Top 40 radio, so I'm currently tapping my feet to Jennifer Lopez's "Play," Missy Elliott's "Get Ur Freak On," and other songs that I fully recognize are ephemera destined for well-merited oblivion. I rarely attend any of the events that should appeal to educated persons – concerts, plays, ballets, poetry readings, lectures; at the end of a busy day, I may watch baseball on television instead of more sophisticated diversions. Still, despite all the junk that I place in the mosaic of my life, my ongoing research, writing, and teaching suffice to keep me mentally alive despite these necessary pauses to wallow in mindless mediocrity.

**T**his is the perfectly respectable, even admirable, purpose of *Star Trek* novels. These bland, predictable narratives fit precisely into the mosaics of many people's busy lives, and their readers never advance to more demanding science fiction for the same reason that I never advance to more demanding music: the novels they read, and the music I listen to, provide exactly what we need, while superior varieties would provide different sorts of rewards that we are already receiving from other aspects of our lives.

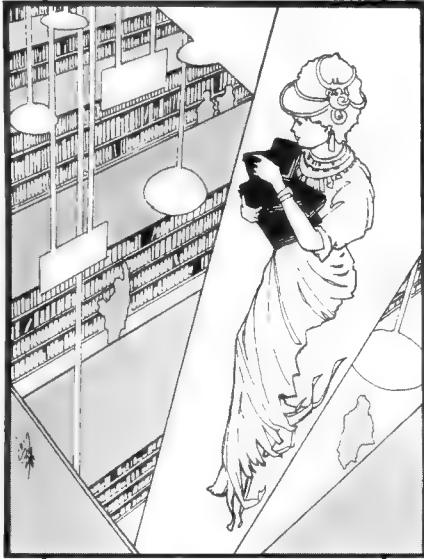


Yet science fiction has long been associated with imaginative and literary aspirations of the grandest sort; must the genre now be homogenized and dumbed down so that its stories can serve as entertainments equivalent to pop songs and baseball games? Well, as long as other forms of science fiction remain available, why not? *Star Trek* novels arouse indignation only because science fiction readers are so often obliged to *pay attention* to them – since they are labelled science fiction, placed in the science fiction sections of bookstores, and sometimes written by established science fiction writers. If we could simply *ignore* them and go about our business – as the noted publications and people have been properly attempting – science fiction readers and *Star Trek* readers could happily co-exist in perpetually separate worlds.

After all, there now exists a popular form of science fiction that is even more objectionable, even more formulaic and uninspired, than *Star Trek* novels, but it inspires not one iota of indignation in the science fiction community because few members are aware of its existence. I refer to the "time travel romances" written by Diana Gabaldon and many others, in which beautiful heroines are transported by unspecified means into attractive past eras to engage in the familiar rolls in the hay with dark, mysterious strangers. Surely, here is science fiction homogenized and dumbed down to the *nth* degree. But science fiction readers remain blissfully unaware of these abominations because they are not labelled science fiction, not placed in the science fiction sections of bookstores, and not written by established science fiction writers. They are the novels that science fiction readers don't see.

Bearing in mind the old *Interzone* term for *Star Trek* novels and the like – "Spinoffery" – one might recall that the word "spinoff" originally referred to a television series created by taking a character from an existing series and placing her in a new milieu to develop a distinctive identity of her own. *Star Trek* novels and time travel romances might be regarded, then, not as *forms* of science fiction but as *spin-offs* of science fiction which both seized a chunk of the genre, placed it in a new milieu, and developed distinctive identities of their own. If, then, my remarks do not accurately represent the nature and benefits of *Star Trek* novels, that may be because these have evolved in isolation to the point that they are no longer usefully regarded as science fiction – so that in discussing them, I unwisely step outside of my area of expertise.

**Gary Westfahl**



REVIEWED

While reading Terry Bisson's acidly funny fable, *The Pickup Artist* (Tor, \$22.95), it is impossible not to imagine that Kurt Vonnegut has somehow rewritten J. G. Ballard's *Hello America*. Both novels trace similar trajectories from New York to Las Vegas across an America haunted by its past, but unlike the radioactive glow with which Ballard suffused his remixed myths, Bisson's take is mordantly absurdist.

The eponymous hero, Hank Shapiro, works for the Bureau of Arts and Entertainment, picking up, like a combination of reverse postman and bounty hunter, copies of works by 20th-century authors, singers and actors designated for deletion. For it

## Getting into Death

Paul McAuley

has been agreed that there's too much stuff in the world, and room for the new must be made by destroying those works of art nominated for oblivion by the Deletion Engine. Shapiro is a bewildered innocent and natural straight man, immersed in the minutia of his job ("It was *The Fugitive*, much on the news when it was deleted last year as it was the end, for all practical purposes, of Harrison Ford") and enjoying the ability to decide how and when to bestow small rewards to people who turn in stuff slated for deletion – "At bottom, ours is a people job and I'm a people person." But then, on impulse, he fails to turn in a Hank Williams LP he has collected; he visits a bootlegger club to hear it played; there's a police raid; the LP vanishes; the chase is on.

For most of its length, *The Pickup Artist* is a fine, wry, whimsical ride. Hank, accompanied by his ailing dog, a woman who has been carrying her artist mentor's baby for nine years, and the body of Cowboy Bob, the man who originally stole the Hank Williams LP, sets off on a picaresque journey to retrieve the record (as blatant a McGuffin as ever there was) and win his job back. Their adventures are interleaved with chunks of backstory describing in a biting satire of the American legal process how a movement started by art terrorists who blew up and burned down museums and galleries gained respectability thanks to the intervention of a reclusive billionaire, Mr Bill.

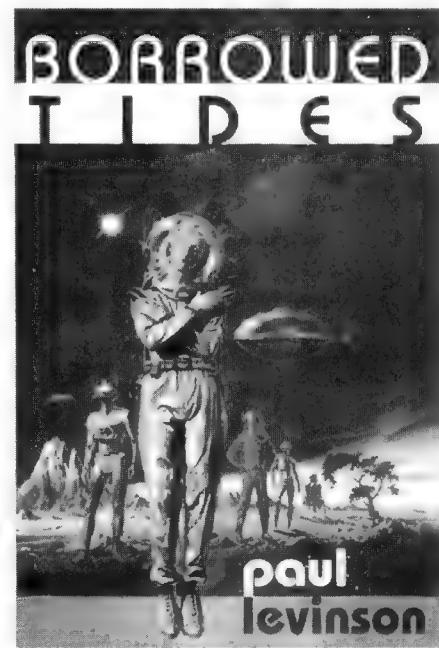
In a fine and funny narrative that's primarily about loss and death, Bisson treads with ease the line between bathos and poignant melancholy. As in *Voyage to the Red Planet*, his invocation of the trivia of popular

culture evokes an elegiac vision of a lost America; he delivers inventive twists on staple of tropes, and knockabout riffs on talking corpses, talking dogs and talking babies; depicts in fine, plausible detail the evolution and practise of the Deletion scheme which, in the present post-Millennial cultural junkyard, not only sounds plausible, but actually useful.

*The Pickup Artist* disappoints only in its ending. For despite the hectic hatchings, matchings, despatchings and revelations that occur once Hank and his disparate crew reach Las Vegas, the final pages don't cohere into a satisfactory finale. Instead, we have to make do with a slingshot ending for what might be a sequel, and must remember that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive.

It should go without saying that if you're going to review something, you should read it first – each and every word. And on your behalf, these past dozen years or so, I've dutifully frowned and puzzled my way through some pretty arid and unedifying tracts of prose (and luckily a good deal more that sang with the joy of its making). I've never before admitted defeat (although I have sometimes nimbly sidestepped some obvious stinkers), but now I've met my match. Paul Levinson's *Borrowed Tides* (Tor, \$22.95) remains defiantly unread past page 109, despite being the only material to hand during an enforced 29-hour layover at a provincial French airport.

Levinson has gained some attention with his first novel, a police procedural/biotech thriller, *The Silk Code* (which I haven't read, and now, alas, never will), and *Borrowed Tides*



has a competent first chapter in which the two main protagonists meet as kids in the 1960s, and the appealingly loony premise that the key to solving the problem of interstellar flight is to draw on Native American lore. But after a hundred dreary pages of action advanced through resoundingly clunky dialogue in the manner of Enid Blyton's Famous Five stories, incoherent plotting and impressive scientific illiteracy, including ignorance of the orbital mechanics that forms the rationale for the plot, I could go no further.

I tried, I really did, while I waited for Air France to find a plane that worked, but page 109 is as far as I got, so I really don't know if everything comes good in the end, or that the whole thing is suddenly revealed to be some kind of postmodern pisstake. Somehow, I seriously doubt either possibility, and if you're curious enough to want to find out if I'm wrong, don't say I didn't warn you.

From a second novel which should be the career equivalent of the asteroid that did for the dinosaurs, let's quickly pass on to a trio of career-affirming short-story collections. Although short stories are the very pulse of the genre, they are often all too ephemeral, and single-author collections are mostly unsafe commercial propositions. All three under consideration amply deserve their publishers' conviction and enthusiasm.

The title of Bruce Sterling's latest collection of short fiction, *A Good Old-Fashioned Future* (Gollancz, £6.99), is not merely a typical bit of knowing, Sterling-style irony. For while the seven novellas and

novelettes are crammed with Sterling's signature mix of eyeball kicks, sly humour, rich extrapolative riffs on bleeding edge technology, and the sparks that fly between colliding cultures, they are also deeply imbued with the time-honoured science-fictional belief that inhabitants of society's margins can triumph over the mainstream through their mastery of arcane knowledge.

In both "Maneki Neko" and the Hugo Award-winning "Bicycle Repairman," intrusive federal agents who seek to stamp out dangerously anarchic technological trends are handily trumped by ordinary citizens who have embraced them. The goofy slacker ethos of the eponymous hero of "Deep Eddy" (who also has an important but mostly off-stage role in "Bicycle Repairman") carries him through one of the convulsively violent but deeply necessary riots that occasionally sweep through the cities of decentralized Europe. The same kind of zen acceptance of the cultural flow informs the schemes of Sterling's antihero Leggy Starlitz in "The Littlest Jackal," and the postmodern espionage of "Taklamakan," with its central Ballardian image of abandoned starships simmering in a cavern created by a nuclear test. Only "Big Jelly," written in collaboration with Rudy Rucker, fails to cohere: exuberant invention tears apart the delicate membrane of story.

As anyone who has been trapped on a corporate voicemail tree will tell you (Bisson does a terrific riff on that particular hell in *The Pickup Artist*), the idea that technology will do nothing else but empower and liberate individuals is, quite frankly, a ridiculously Utopian notion. But while Sterling's witty, energetic stories are at bottom unashamed technophilic utopias, in which geeks are shyly triumphant, AIs are benevolent, tribalism has triumphed over centralist government, and we can all be freed by technology if we can only learn to surf the zeitgeist, they are also spookily persuasive, and leave you wishing that our future really could be like theirs.

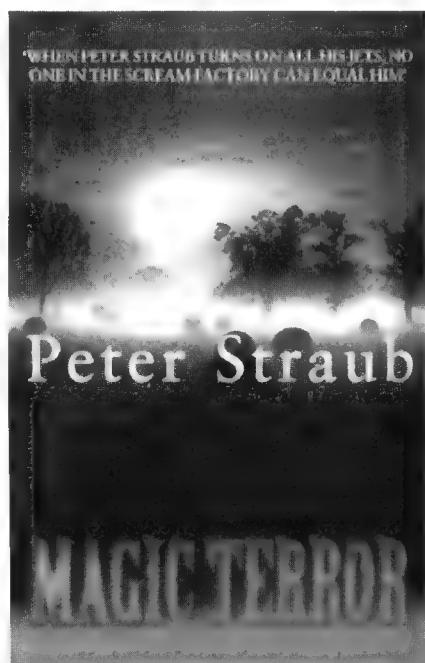
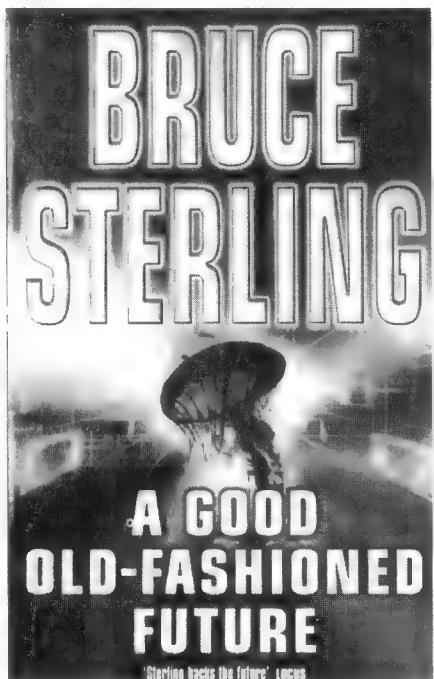
**D**ossier (Creative Arts Book Company, 833 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, CA 94710, USA, \$13.95) is the first short-story collection by Stepan Chapman, whose first novel, *The Troika*, won the Philip K. Dick Award in 1998. Chapman's first short story was published in *Analog* back in 1969, and his long and eclectic career is reflected in the range of magazines and anthologies from which this collection was gathered.

The two longest pieces are exemplars of his alchemical style. "At Her Ladyship's Suggestion" is an overt

homage to Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, set on an isolated North Atlantic island whose population is divided into the knuckly, inbred Shore People and their rulers, the capricious and cruel Windleech family, whose history of fantastic murders is no match for a castaway dwarf who executes a revolution for his own ends. "Minutes of the Last Meeting" is crammed, hectic, but beautifully controlled steampunk alternate history in which the rule of Tsar Nicholas II is underpinned by the Imperial Intelligence Entelechy, an all-seeing artificial intelligence, while his haemophiliac son is kept alive by nanotech surgical machines; when the anarchists finally make their move, aided by a psychic spy, the tsar must make a decision that could end the world.

In both stories, the final lines transmute both gothic tragedy and hectic steampunk burlesque to fairytale metafiction, and many of the 17 stories collected here – fables and fragments about trials and transformations, challenges and curse – contain twists in the tale that reframe their narratives from a sudden, unexpected perspective. While they range across the world (and occasionally beyond it), they all have the universality of myths and fairy tales; Chapman's alchemical storytelling is highly recommended.

**T**he seven stories collected in *Magic Terror* (HarperCollins, £9.99) demonstrates Peter Straub's talent for infusing genre tropes with deeply felt characterization and unflinching observations of the darker corners of human behaviour. In each, like the





REVIEWED

Wall Street financier in the black comedy of "Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff," who engages the two self-styled "detectives extraordinaire" to implement his desire for revenge on his adulterous wife and her lover, we find that we are embarked on a stranger and more harrowing journey than we first expected.

The World Fantasy Award-winning "The Ghost Village" is about a discovery that evokes a genuine sense of evil in the midst of the Vietnam war; "Hunger, an Introduction," narrated by an arrogant, self-deluded murderer, reveals that the world is, for the dead, far more wonderful than the living can

imagine. The other stories, about murders and murderers, of painful educations and enlightenments, do not contain overtly fantastic elements, but all are suffused with intimations of the skull beneath the skin of our ordinary world. "Ashputtle" is the tale of a wicked witch who happens to be a teacher, while the tender, unflinching regard of "Bunny is Good Bread," the story of the grotesque upbringing of a boy at the hands of his didactic father, reminded this reader of the best of Theodore Sturgeon. In "Isn't it Romantic?" a contract killer loses himself in the mazes of his own counterplots, and in "Pork Pie Hat" a

story ostensibly about a student's discovery of a reclusive jazz musician takes a darker turn when he unpicks the truth behind a Halloween adventure from the musician's childhood.

From the cold, barbed voice of Mrs Asch in "Ashputtle" to the unlikely but perfect synthesis of Damon Runyon and Herman Melville in "Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff," Straub exhibits a deft mastery of narrative voice, and his tours of the world's darker corners and the outer edges of human nature are chillingly plausible, yet twinkle, darkly, with knowing humour.

Paul McAuley

**T**erry Pratchett's Discworld has developed organically, if chaotically, as the series has grown over the past 18 years. Pratchett has allowed his society to develop, behind the humorous sketches, into an Early Modern culture. In *Thief of Time* (Doubleday, £16.99), he turns his attention to the question of how time is experienced in different areas of the world.

The Auditors have returned to the Discworld to bring order and rules, and Lady LeJean charges Jeremy Clockson, an insanely talented clockmaker, with recreating the most accurate clock that Discworld has ever seen, now only remembered in a fairy tale. In the monastery of Oi Dong, the History Monks manipulate time via the Procrastinators, ensuring that it is in plentiful supply to the areas that need it most. Lu Tze, one of the secret masters, takes on Lobsang Ludd as an apprentice. When Ludd manages to control the Procrastinators during an accident, Lu Tze realizes that the lad has some amazing time skills and so they set out to destroy the clock that Clockson is remaking.

Having heard of the Auditors' plan, Death decides to reform the Four Horsemen for one last ride, unaware that the Fifth Horseman is prepared to rejoin them. Whilst doing this, he charges Susan Sto Helit with disrupting the Auditors.

Rather than relying upon stock jokes, Pratchett manages to find new targets for his wit through various skits and bouts of wordplay. Martial-arts movies are beautifully sent up – from Lu Tze's book of "quotations" to the fight scenes. However he reserves the Apocalypse for special treatment. Not only does he satirize the actual construction of the event, from a dogmatic argument as to which books (and therefore characters) were included to the number of Horsemen and their willingness to rejoin.

However, there is a slight maudlin tone to the novel. Whilst talking to the Horsemen, Death comments: "LOOK AT THE HAND. FOUR FINGERS AND A THUMB. A HUMAN HAND. HUMANS

## Joys to Read

Iain Emsley

GAVE YOU THAT SHAPE." (Page 278.) Humanity is beginning to affect the Universe itself, even if unconsciously. Thus the assumptions that Death and company have relied upon are challenged, forcing them to join in this



## THIEF OF TIME

new way of life. Rather than keeping this reformation as a Spinal Tap-esque reunion, Pratchett turns it into a pivotal moment, offering the Universe a new perspective on the humans that it tends to despise.

The Discworld has gone past the point of being a flat land, and *Thief of Time* confirms this maturity. Pratchett is still the best humorous fantasist around but he is also able to give the novels a serious undertone – and it is one which complements the humour delightfully.

**M**iller Lau's debut novel, *Talisker* (Earthlight, £6.99), is startling. It has a sense of urgency, a need to tell its tale, though does not rush headlong into action. Rather she is content to wait for the characters to develop and the situation to unfold, sometimes in an offbeat fashion. Lau plays with two genres, folding a crime story into the main fantasy novel, obliging the protagonists to move between two worlds, but in doing so she fully realizes both worlds.

Duncan Talisker is released from an Edinburgh prison, having served a sentence for murdering several women. His former school friend, Alessandro Chaplin, arrested him. However, the murders soon begin again after his release and Chaplin re-arrests Talisker. Thus begins a Rebus-esque game of cat and mouse. Meanwhile, in the land of Sutra, a prophecy is nearing completion and Talisker has been marked as the only person who can fulfil the prophecy and prevent the return of Corvus. Having been sent from Edinburgh together with an ancestral ghost, Malky Macleod, and (by accident) Chaplin, Talisker finds himself embroiled in the defence of the land. But while they deal with the expectations placed upon them in Sutra, both Chaplin and Talisker must solve the murders in Edinburgh.

Lau resists pat solutions and the magical powers of camaraderie to heal Talisker and Chaplin's wounds, making them deal with their own guilt and subsequent redemption

whilst binding them to the land. Malky acts as a catalyst, slowly drawing Talisker out of his post-imprisonment slump and encouraging him to work through his own grief while solving the murders. Chaplin, having been accidentally transported to Sutra, finds himself progressing through his newly discovered ability as a storyteller. He aids Talisker's action through his ability to interpret the stories that are intimately bound into the landscape, but is still highly suspicious of him until the real murderer's identity becomes evident during a sojourn in Edinburgh.

Whilst Talisker and Chaplin work

through their own problems, Lau develops the characters of Una and Phyrr to rebalance the novel. Talisker and company rescue Una when her family is attacked by one of Corvus's minions. Talisker takes on her husband's oath, so adopting the warrior role, but Una comes into her own before the battle when protecting the deformed baby from being killed due to superstition. Phyrr, Corvus's sister, brings in her own form of chaos, sowing doubts in Talisker's mind rather than killing him as she had previously promised Corvus. Although they come into their own late in the novel, Lau has set them up to become

major characters in future books.

The author has taken her time to build a complete world that takes on a life of its own. There is a sense that the land itself is intimately tied into its own mythology and requires the myths to be retold to begin its own healing process, echoing Guy Gavriel Kay's "Fionavar Tapestry" series. *Talisker* is a strong novel and there are sufficient threads to hint at future books. This sense of sub-creation gives the world and its characters a depth not seen in many other fantasy debuts – and, as such, *Talisker* is a joy to read.

Iain Emsley

**F**ifty years ago, when John Beynon Harris (aka John Wyndham) wrote *The Day of the Triffids*, the publishing world was a much simpler place. The "fantasy blockbuster" and the "airport novel" were both far in the future, as was the notion that any moderately-successful book must immediately be followed by a sequel or, ideally, an open-ended series. Even though, following the success of the movie (*Village of the Damned*), Harris was persuaded to attempt a sequel to *The Midwich Cuckoos*, he soon abandoned the attempt feeling that he had said all there was to say on the subject in the first book. I'm sure he would have felt the same about a sequel to *The Day of the Triffids*.

Alas, times have changed, and we have entered an era where a young, talented author (such as Simon Clark), is much more likely to get published if he writes some brain-dead hackwork set in a *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* universe, or pens a sequel to some "classic" work, than if he produces something original. Under such conditions, no matter how talented the author, the end-result is rarely of any lasting merit and, sadly, Simon Clark's *The Night of the Triffids* (Hodder & Stoughton, £17.99) is no exception.

The book opens well enough (after an irrelevant prologue) with:

"When nine o'clock on a summer's morning appears, so far as your eyes can tell, as dark as midnight in the very depths of winter, then there is something very seriously wrong somewhere."

... which is, of course, a deliberate parallel to the opening of *The Day of the Triffids*:

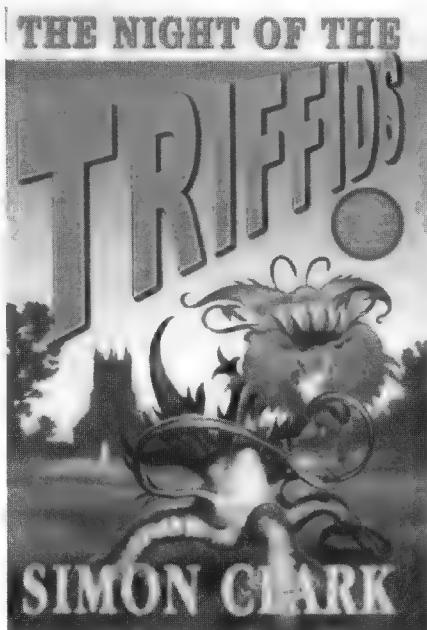
"When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere."

Twenty-five years after the events in *The Day of the Triffids*, a "supernatural darkness" has descended on the Earth, rendering the Sighted more helpless than the Blind. This immediately grabs

## More of a Turkey than a Triffid

Phil Stephensen-Payne

the reader's attention as he wonders what the explanation for this darkness might be and what effect it will have on the world.



Four hundred pages later, at the end of the book, he is no wiser. The only purpose of the darkness appears to be to justify the title of the novel – it has no visible impact on the plot, and vaguely drifts away during the course of the story (and is occasionally completely forgotten by the author as when a midnight attack midway through the book is described as being "by the beautiful light of the silvery moon"). As for an explanation, there is a brief comment in the final chapter (no doubt at the insistence of the publishers) but it makes no sense in terms of the detailed descriptions of the darkness in the earlier parts of the novel.

This sort of "sloppy plotting" recurs time and again throughout. Early in the book, the hero crashes his plane and mentally thanks the seagull that caused it because "the bird had just saved his life," although quite why this should be the case is never clear. Shortly thereafter he crashes another plane in the middle of a critical "mission" because he loses contact with ground control, although no explanation is ever given as to why this happened and it is clearly just a device to advance the plot.

The plot itself, to be fair, is an entertaining-enough pulp "yarn." After a fairly aimless start stumbling around in the darkness and exploring, very superficially, the society that has developed on the Isle of Wight, the hero is then whisked off to New York to do battle with (and, of course, defeat) an evil mastermind, and the remainder of the book is completely taken up with this battle. It is a story (trimmed of the unnecessary "bloat" that is *de rigueur* in any bestseller today) that could easily have graced the pages of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* or *Planet Stories* in the 1930s, and might even have been written by a young John Beynon Harris, struggling to learn his craft.

This is, perhaps, the biggest irony of *The Night of the Triffids*, as it typifies so well everything that Harris was struggling to escape from when he



adopted the pseudonym of John Wyndham and wrote the books that made him famous. The most obvious manifestation of this was his development of well-rounded and believable characters – although there were “good guys” and “bad guys,” it was rarely clear-cut as to which was which, and there was always a hint of moral ambiguity about both heroes and villains. This is evidently felt to be too subtle for today’s audience, and you won’t find any such ambiguity in the current novel, where the hero has motives that are pure as the driven snow and the villain has stepped straight out of the music hall, lacking only a mustachio to twirl as he explains his diabolical plot to conquer the world.

At a deeper level, too, *The Night of the Triffids* goes against everything that Harris stood for. A recurrent theme in his later books (and very visible in *The Day of the Triffids*) is the inherent fragility of “civilization” – a vast network of interlinked and interdependent elements that is prone to collapse in the face of any form of “catastrophe.” Simon Clark’s views are influenced much more by those of the late E. E. “Doc” Smith, where all you need is a plucky lad, and a bit of hard work, and miracles can be achieved.

Thus, for instance, not only have the people on the Isle of Wight (a location not renowned for its oil refineries) managed to find a way to create high-octane jet fuel from triffid oil, but they have also managed to keep a squadron of jet fighters and jet bombers fully operational, despite the absence of any trained engineers or machine-shops. Similarly, the villain and his team, isolated on Manhattan, have managed to develop (by a date which the chronology of the book suggests must be the mid-1970s) a degree of sophistication in embryo implantation that our own timeline did not witness until a couple of years ago – again without, it appears, the benefit of any medical research laboratories (which are not exactly thick on the ground in Manhattan).

And amidst all this, what of the triffids? Not much, really – for most of the book the author has clearly forgotten them completely and they just stand on the sidelines rattling their stalks in a rather embarrassed fashion. Every now and again, probably at the insistence of the publisher, a triffid or two (usually some dramatic, new, mutated version such as a 60-foot-tall triffid or an underwater triffid) moves centre-stage, only to be chased off again within a page or so.

Perhaps the oddest thing about the book is Simon Clark’s protestations on

the rear cover of how much he loves *The Day of the Triffids* and, in particular:

“And yet always when I re-read this great book, I feel an aching sense of loss as I reach the end. The characters were leaving me. But deep down I knew their stories continued. For years I dreamed about their future adventures. Now, at long last, I can slip into the hero’s shoes.”

... suggesting a direct continuation of the original storyline. However, this is not the case – as already mentioned, the sequel opens 25 after *The Day of the Triffids* and the only one of the major characters that appears at all in the new book, and then only briefly, is William Maser who is now a defeated, old man, whom we discover (almost in passing) has spent all the intervening time in futile research on triffids when the answer was blindingly obvious

(albeit completely implausible) all the time.

And, saddest of all, just when you think it is all over, Clark introduces a deliberate narrative hook into the final pages and ends with the ominous words:

“I can’t with any certainty write ‘The End’.

“Instead, on a threshold of a new world and new adventures, I can — and I will — write with total confidence:

“This is the beginning....”

... suggesting he has a multi-book contract and that we are about to be flooded with a whole series of these monstrosities. Pray heaven that enough people have the sense *not* to buy this novel to make such sequels still-born.

Phil Stephensen-Payne

## The Hour of the Warrior

Matt Colborn

Robert E. Howard was one of the founders of modern fantasy, and his creation, Conan, is almost as iconic as Tarzan or Bilbo Baggins. *The Conan Chronicles, Vol. 1: The People of the Black Circle* (Gollancz, £6.99) and *Vol. 2: The Hour of the Dragon* (Gollancz, £7.99), edited by Stephen Jones, collect all of the Conan stories that Howard wrote for *Weird Tales*, with the addition of story fragments. These stories remain powerful, over 65 years after their first publication.

If we are to believe his girlfriend Novalyne Ellis-Price, the Conan stories were roared aloud by Bob Howard as he typed, and they certainly exhibit the strengths and weaknesses of such extemporising. The plots are often formulaic, many of the characters ciphers, and sometimes the language is excruciatingly clumsy. But Howard remains a storyteller of talent, and most of the time, his stories hang together well. The first published Conan story, “The Phoenix on the Sword,” is pretty representative. Conan, King of Aquilonia, prevents a magician from assassinating him – by means of by magic, muscle and his wits. The story is a combination of political intrigue, “weird tale,” and

adventure. All that is lacking is a girl, a deficiency which Howard makes up for in the other stories.

The character of Conan is fully formed from the word go. He is the muscular savage who moves with panther-like ease, and lives by his wits as much as his sword. One could accuse Conan of being the stereotypical superman. He is certainly a “noble savage,” who repeatedly outwits the civilized decadents. Conan is depicted as an ideal of masculinity, to a point which might almost be distasteful to some, or faintly ludicrous to others.

But there are more serious charges one could level at Howard’s fiction, because his work is vulnerable to accusations of racism and sexism. Certainly, many of the women in the Conan stories just seem to be included for their aesthetic value. In “The Slithering Shadow,” Natala spends much of her time wailing, and the heroine in “The Devil in Iron” is just plain wimpy. Often, women with power prove to be evil witches, or worse; the twin of Queen Taramis in “A Witch Shall be Born” is unrepentantly wicked, as is the vampiric *femme fatale* in the novel *The Hour of the Dragon*. But there are



more positive depictions of women in Conan, examples being Valeria in "Red Nails" and Balit in "The Queen of the Black Coast." Both have some measure of independence, although they are still eclipsed by Conan.

The accusations of racial stereotyping are harder to answer. The story which is perhaps the worst offender is "Shadows in Zamboula," which has Conan battling black cannibals with sharp teeth. Many of the evil magicians Conan fights are from lands such as Stygia, and are dusky-skinned, oriental stereotypes. Howard, too, has a certain preoccupation with racial purity – Conan himself is from a pure race, and halfbreeds, like the inn-keeper in the "Zamboula" story, are often portrayed as treacherous. These features of the Conan stories should not be overemphasized. One must never forget the historical context of Howard's life; rural Texas in the 1930s was not the most cosmopolitan of places. Neither has racism disappeared from today's popular culture, as the most recent *Star Wars* film makes evident.

What is most memorable about the stories is the imagery. The tales, as with so many in pulp fiction, are like gaudy paintings, with fantastic scenes daubed with colourful brush-strokes. It's no coincidence that the first Arnold Schwarzenegger Conan film managed to include several of the most memorable images from the Conan stories, whilst following none of Howard's plots. Included was a scene from "A Witch is Born," where a crucified Conan kills a vulture by biting its neck. Later in the film, he is saved from death by the timely materialization of the spirit of his lover – exactly what happens at the

climax of "The Queen of the Black Coast." Conan's world, too, is a patchwork of powerful images taken from history. Witness the pseudo-medieval kingdom of Aquilonia, complete with knights, jousts and chivalry. Witness also the odd "ancient Egypt" (Stygia), the exoticism of Zingara, and the oddly tropical barbarity of the Picts. Conan's Hyborea, supposedly occurring before history, actually occurs in no time at all. It is a world of the imagination in a functional, as well as a literal sense.

Gollancz is to be congratulated on the release of these titles. Welcome also is the two-part summary of Howard's life, provided at the end of the volumes, which includes an "afterlife" of Conan in books, comics, and films. One slight criticism of the first volume is the number of typographical errors, which are just frequent enough to be irritating, but this seems to have been sorted out by volume two. Long live Conan!

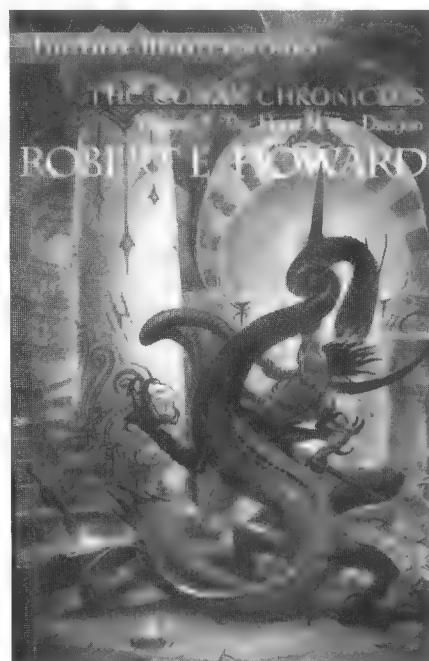
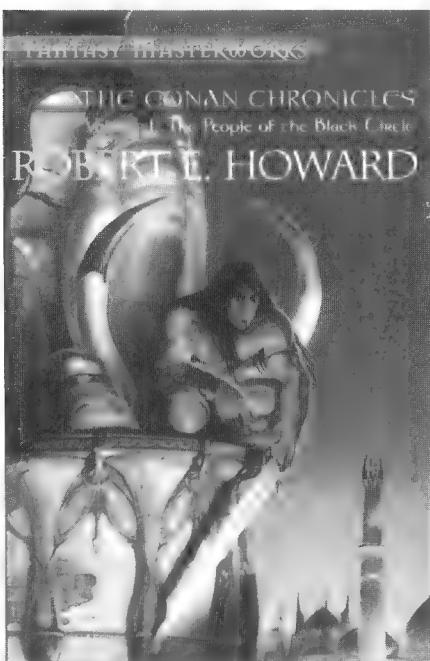
Another publication in the "Fantasy Masterworks" series, *Elric* (Gollancz, £6.99), is easily comparable to Conan. The collection brings together the earlier stories and novels of the Elric saga, written by Michael Moorcock in the 1960s. Like Howard's fiction, they were written at top speed for a pulp market – the digest-sized British magazine *Science Fantasy*.

Elric is introduced in "The Dreaming City" as the former ruler of the fabled Melniboné, now ousted by his treacherous cousin Yrkoon. Elric plots the overthrow of his cousin, but his demonic ally, Arioch, is fickle, and his magical sword, Stormbringer, a malign influence. By the end of the first novel, Elric's native city is destroyed, and his lover is killed by

Stormbringer, wielded by Elric himself. Exiled from his native Imrryr, he travels the world of the young kingdoms.

Moorcock claims that Elric was intended to be the polar opposite of the Conan-type hero; he is thin, albino, and a weakling, unless strengthened by the power lent by Stormbringer. Yet Howard's legacy colours Elric. In some respects, he resembles another of Howard's heroes, King Kull, who is exiled from his native Atlantis for the mercy-killing of a woman. Like many of Howard's characters, Elric is tragic. He is allied to the forces of Chaos, but he finds himself fighting against them. Indeed, his continued association with Chaos, and particularly the blade Stormbringer, gradually destroys him.

Because of their influences, and the speedy way in which they were written, the Elric stories share some of the pitfalls of Howard's writing. Many of the characters are ciphers, and many of the plots have an "off-the shelf" feel to them. Elric's fights with the Sorcerer Theleb K'aarna are pure Howard, but there are always twists of Moorcock's own. Moorcock, too, has Howard's ability to create memorable spectacles, and his monsters are terrific – a personal favourite is Meerclar, the King of Cats. But Moorcock's stories are most memorable when he speaks for himself and doesn't simply recycle pulp clichés. This is most apparent in the longest story presented in the collection, the novel *Stormbringer*, where Elric meets his fate. The work has an apocalyptic quality which lifts it above most of the other Elric tales, and it's essentially a work of adolescent angst. *Stormbringer* is the story of the destruction of Elric's



FANTASY MASTERWORKS

CLRIC

MICHAEL  
MOORCOCK





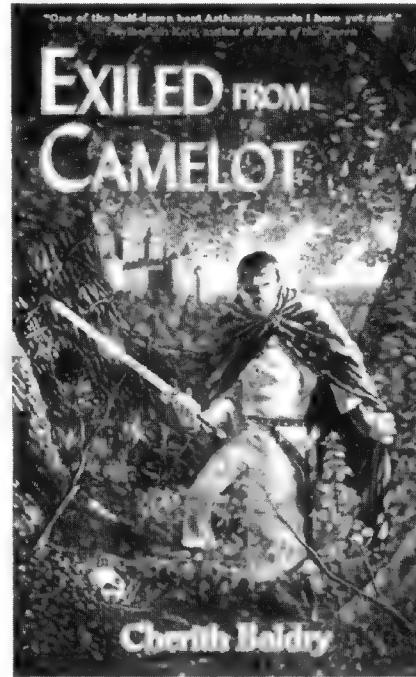
world, and Elric himself, by the forces of Chaos. It ends with Elric being stabbed by his own sword; for Stormbringer represents the destructive forces within Elric that he is also dependent upon. It is this paradox which drives all of the Elric tales, and makes them at the core stories about growing up.

This volume is essentially an omnibus version of materials originally collected in the two very early Moorcock books *The Stealer of Souls* (1963) and *Stormbringer* (1965). It also overlaps heavily with two previous omnibus volumes published by Orion/Millennium, *Elric of Melniboné* and *Stormbringer* (both 1993). The map is the same as the one published in the latter editions, but excluded are later novels like *The Fortress of the Pearl* (1989) and *The Revenge of the Rose* (1991). Being works of greater maturity and sophistication, those excluded later books contrast interestingly with the 1960s Elric. If you want to read just the "original" Elric, buy this volume – but completists, or any readers who want to appreciate the full picture, should also look for the later books.

Arthurian stories occupy a strange position in fantasy literature. In some respects, they are an early example of "shared-world" literature, rather like the spinoff novels set in the *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who* universes. However, the world which is "shared" by writers of Arthurian literature tends to be less coherent than any contemporary example. This is because it is based on the variant texts of medieval romances, based themselves upon vague legends from Dark Age Britain. Authors have two broad options: they can go back and try to reconstruct a "realistic" Dark Age Arthur, or they can adopt the world of the medieval romances, primarily represented by Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Cherith Baldry, in *Exiled from Camelot* (Green Knight, \$14.95 or £10.99), takes the second option, and sets her action in what is essentially Malory's world, using Malory's characters as templates. The story centres around the character of Kay, who is the Seneschal of Britain and Arthur's adopted brother. Kay is exiled from Camelot after the murder of a bastard son of Arthur's, Loholt, who appears in the court of Camelot and worms his way into the king's favour. During Kay's exile, he is confronted by one of Arthur's rival lords, Briant des Isles, and Briant's treacherous consort, Brisane, who appears to be possessed by an evil spirit. He also meets allies; in particular Alienor, and her villagers.

One of the strictures of shared-



world fiction is that the main characters can end up acting in rather stereotypical ways, and to a degree, this happens in *Exiled from Camelot*. Arthur comes across as rather two-dimensional; he remains a suffering icon, rather than a person. Lancelot is also rather flat, and is characteristically chivalrous and a little dim. Baldry has far more scope to develop the "minor" characters in the Arthurian drama, and this is perhaps why Kay was a wise choice of protagonist. She manages to turn the

rather faceless Kay into someone a little bit interesting. He is depicted as outwardly prickly, but basically caring; and he has the respect of the common folk with whom he has to work to ensure the day-to-day running of Camelot. These interpersonal skills come in useful during his exile, where he has to take charge of a village whose resources have been squandered by its lord, Meliant.

Meliant and Alienor, Meliant's sister, are in several respects the most interesting characters in the book. Meliant has given himself to the same spirit who inhabits Brisane, in return for power, so that he can avenge himself on Lancelot for the death of his father. He is young and impetuous, misguided rather than evil. When we first meet her, Alienor is mad from resisting the spirit, but she soon becomes sane and proves far cannier than her brother. The other new characters seem to be substitutes for traditional Arthurian players who do not appear in *Exiled*; Brisane is rather like Morgan Le Fay, and Loholt recalls Mordred.

The novel is entertaining, and despite one or two fluffs, well written. Its main problem is that it is restricted by the shared back-story; as with a *Star Trek* novel, it must end up with order restored pretty much as it was at the beginning of the book, and one is left feeling that Kay's adventures haven't really changed him at all. Despite these restrictions, Baldry tells a good story, and anyone with a soft spot for Arthurian literature should enjoy it.

Matt Colborn

## He Do the Police in Different Voices

Paul Beardsley

Philip Pullman has freely admitted that he steals from every book he reads. This is especially apparent in *I Was a Rat; or, The Scarlet Slippers*. Primarily a sequel to the Cinderella story, it recalls everything from Charles Dickens to the Elephant Man to the wedding of Charles and Diana and much else. Although unmistakably a children's book, readers familiar with

the author's work will not be surprised that the treatment of the ratboy is quite harrowing at times – Pullman's fantasies tend to be of the unflinching kind. The book is read by Pullman himself, who gives different voices to each of the characters – sometimes with great success, sometimes not. I suppose it's too much to expect a full cast of actors to appear in a relatively minor

Pullman, as it did in the *His Dark Materials* series, but it's always worth hearing this author read his own work.

**Tom's Midnight Garden** by Philippa Pearce is probably the definitive timeslip fantasy – even if you haven't read it, you've probably seen one of the TV or film adaptations. Published in 1958, it's the one with the boy from the (then) present day who travels to a Victorian garden whenever the clock in the house strikes thirteen. He is intangible and invisible to all except a young orphan girl called Hattie, whom he befriends. The book is read by Jan Francis, star of the much-loathed sitcom *Just Good Friends*. The result is – dare I say it – a little bit girlie, but it's well worth a revisit, not least for its heartrending evocation of the loss of childhood.

*I Was a Rat* (3 cassettes, 2 hrs 50 min, £9.99) and *Tom's Midnight Garden* (3 cassettes, 5 hrs 45 min, £9.99) are unabridged and available from Chivers Press Limited, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX (tel. 01225 335336; fax 01225 310771).

Some of Diana Wynne Jones's *Chrestomanci* books have been given the audio treatment, including *Charmed Life* which is read by Tom Baker. This seems like astute marketing, coming in the wake of Stephen Fry's superb readings of the Harry Potter books. Given that Jones has been writing Potter-style fantasies for far longer than J. K. Rowling, I was hoping to give this a more positive endorsement. Sadly I found it disjointed – at least partly the result of an imperfect abridgement – and the characters unappealing: Cat is wholly passive, his sister Gwendolen is a pain in the arse, and Chrestomanci's an all-powerful nonentity. And contrary to expectation, Tom Baker's reading is nowhere near as good as Stephen Fry's. Still, the story contains some interesting ideas about travel between parallel worlds, and my wife (who is something of an authority on Jones's work) assures me that the other books in the series are much better than this one, so I hope to report on them in due course.

Iain Banks is not a favourite author of mine. His gleeful attitude towards incest, cruelty to animals and the like strikes me as rather puerile, and his stories leave me feeling unenriched. If you don't share this opinion you might be interested in Peter Capaldi's abridged readings of *A Song Of Stone* and *Walking On Glass*.

In *Stone*, Capaldi's voice comes across as hushed and conspiratorial, letting you in on details that he wouldn't tell anybody else. Unfortunately, given the absence of any kind of context (including, most crucially, what the protagonist wants, and what he expects to get) the details

are excruciatingly boring, and they go on for three hours. I felt like the bloke in *Hitch Hiker's Guide* who had to gnaw one of his own legs off to endure a poetry recital. *Glass*, in contrast, is more lighthearted, flitting between a present-day setting and a castle made from books at the end of time.

*Charmed Life*, *A Song Of Stone*, *Walking On Glass* (all 2 cassettes, 3 hrs, abridged, £8.99) available from HarperCollins, 77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB (tel 020 8741 7070; fax 020 8307 4440).

The BBC are releasing the soundtracks of lost *Doctor Who* stories on CD, accompanied by explanatory narration read by former companions. Two recent releases are *The Celestial Toymaker*, featuring William Hartnell's Doctor, and *The Moonbase*, featuring Patrick Troughton's Doctor. The former was long remembered as a classic, but the reality has proven to be something of a disappointment – the theme of the hidden menace in ostensibly innocent children's stories has perhaps been overworked in the intervening decades. On the other hand *The Moonbase* is altogether more appealing, and gets off to a great start, with the TARDIS taking off from Atlantis and crash-landing on the Moon en route for Mars. The Moon is treated as an alien world in its own right, and effective use of (admittedly stock) music puts the listener in the picture quite effectively. Big Finish could learn a lot from this one.

*Doctor Who* soundtracks (2 CDs, 4x25 min episodes, £13.99) available from BBC Radio Collection, PO Box 30811, London W12 0WN (tel 020 8433 2236; fax 020 8433 1040).

Meanwhile, Big Finish continue to release audio plays. I no longer receive review copies, so I recently took out a subscription to catch up with their latest: eleven *Doctor Who* plays and three Bernice Summerfield solo adventures. The quality varies wildly.

At the bottom of the scale there's *Minuet in Hell*, a lengthy non-event, of interest solely because it unites Nicholas Courtney's Brigadier with the "current" Doctor, Paul McGann. They could get away with this sort of thing on TV, but it's galling to know you've spent 14 quid for the privilege of listening to it. Similarly, *The Shadow of the Scourge* is dreadful self-congratulatory rubbish, of note only because it unites Lisa Bowerman's Bernice with Sylvester McCoy's Doctor and Sophie Aldred's Ace.

With two or three forgettable exceptions the TARDIS remains resolutely Earthbound, but at least some of the better stories make use of its time-travel facilities. *The Fires of*

**Vulcan** is an enjoyable enough pure historical, set in Pompeii in AD 79; the much maligned Bonnie

Langford evidently shines when given halfway decent material to work with. *Storm Warning*, Paul McGann's Big Finish debut, has an excellent first episode in which the TARDIS lands on the doomed airship, the R101; sadly, it's spoilt by the arrival of the obligatory squeaky-voiced aliens in part two.

McGann's Doctor turns up again in *The Stones of Venice*, penned by "proper" author Paul Magrs. This one is let down by a cop-out ending which highlights some very strange beliefs apparently common to purveyors of media sf and spinoffery, namely that (a) aliens are intrinsically *interesting* no matter how little thought has gone into their creation, and (b) any impossibility or plot inconsistency can be explained away by their mere presence – one is not supposed to ask "Why should their extraterrestrial origin enable them to do that?" or "Even if they could do that, why would they want to?" Ending aside, *Stones* consists of three-and-a-half episodes of sheer loveliness set in a future Venice on the day it sinks. Cue the lapping canal waters, distant church bells, the music of revellers, and amusing references to Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

You don't have to be very familiar with *Doctor Who* to appreciate *Loup-Garoux*, though if you are you might be pleasantly surprised by Peter Davison's commanding performance as the Doctor. Set in a well-realized Rio de Janeiro of 2080, the play features an aristocratic group of werewolves who coexist with humanity, are nearly immortal, and you can only see them if they want you to. They wipe the floor with Anne Rice's vampires, not least because they can take a joke. And joy of joys, Big Finish have finally given voices to a non-human race that don't make you cringe with embarrassment – even the howling sounds good.

The Bernice solo adventures are now 70 minutes long and begin with a bombastic theme song that is presumably supposed to evoke *James Bond* rather than *Rupert the Bear*. We're told that the most recent play, *The Stone's Lament*, uses Robert Wise's film *The Haunting* as its template. In other words it's a lazy imitation. This seems to be the way the Bernice plays are going, which is a real shame.

*Doctor Who* audio plays (2 CDs, 4x25 min episodes, £13.99) and Bernice audio plays (1 CD, 70 min, £9.99) available from Big Finish Productions Ltd, PO Box 1127, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 3LW (tel 01628 828283; fax 01628 828313).

Paul Beardsley

# BOOKS RECEIVED



JUNE  
2001

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

## Aldiss, Brian. *Supertoys Last All Summer Long, and Other Stories of Future*

**Time.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-28061-0, xix+232pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf collection, first published in the UK, 2001; apart from the title story, which is over 30 years old and was first collected in *The Moment of Eclipse* [1970], and apart from one other much more recent tale, "Becoming the Full Butterfly," which first appeared in *Interzone* 93 and was collected in *The Secret of This Book* [1995], this gathering of 19 pieces appears to be all-new; chief among them are two recently-written sequels to the title story, "Supertoys When Winter Comes" and "Supertoys in Other Seasons," neither of which has had prior publication; there is also an interesting 12-page Foreword in which Aldiss describes his working relationship with the late Stanley Kubrick, who bought the film rights to the original "Supertoys" story many years ago and was planning to use it as the basis of his abortive sf movie *AI* [now filmed by Steven Spielberg]; this volume, mostly consisting of brief, fable-like pieces, is Aldiss's tie-in to the *AI* movie [released in July 2001]; recommended.) 20th June 2001.

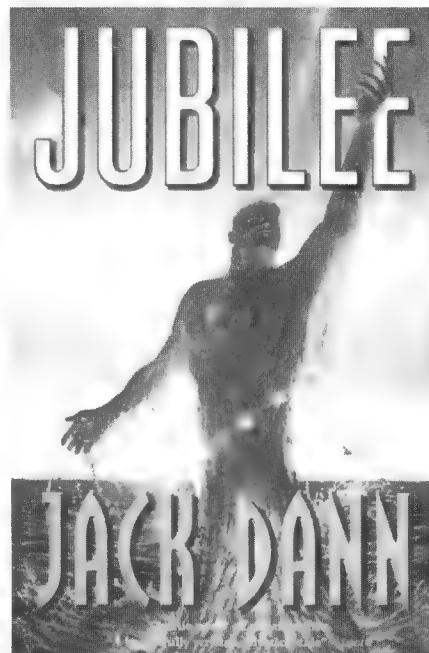
**Audley, Anselm. *Heresy: Book One of The Aquasilva Trilogy.*** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7432-0950-8, 405pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British

writer who is evidently very young: "Anselm Audley was 18 in June 2000," the publishers tell us; "he is now at St John's College, Oxford, reading Ancient and Modern History.") June 2001.

## Ballard, J. G. *The Atrocity Exhibition.*

Preface by William Burroughs. "Modern Classic." Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-711686-1, viii+184pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Avant-garde sf collection, first published in the UK, 1970 [actually first published in book form in the Danish language in 1969, translated from the author's English by Janick Storm]; this is Ballard's famous gathering of his late-1960s "condensed novels," reissued in a handy edition which also contains the copious notes that JGB wrote for the expanded, large-format, San Francisco-published, Re/Search edition [1990]; however, it does not contain the illustrations by various hands which graced that American version, nor two of the additional pieces of fiction that appeared there — "The Secret History of World War 3," which is available in the collection *War Fever* [1990], and "Queen Elizabeth's Rhinoplasty," an imaginary-operation piece which we assume has been left out for reasons of decorum; this 2001 reissue also contains a new, three-paragraph "Author's Note" [p. vi]; Will Self's back-cover quote, from a *Time Out* review of the early 1990s, is worth re-quoting: "I would argue that *The Atrocity Exhibition*... represents the zenith of the experimental novel in English" [and] "Ballard's marginalia are a *tour de force*, a wholly original work in their own right.") Late entry: *Spring* (?) publication, received in June 2001.

**Ballard, J. G. *The Day of Creation.*** "Modern Classic." Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-654594-7, 287pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Mainstream [but near-sf] novel, first published in the UK, 1987; HarperCollins are in the midst of reissuing many of Ballard's books in



this uniform "Flamingo Modern Classics" edition; all are attractively designed with photographic montage covers; in addition to the titles immediately above and below, others in the same format, reissued in 2000, include *The Crystal World* [1966], *High-Rise* [1975] and *The Unlimited Dream Company* [1979].) Late entry: *Spring* (?) publication, received in June 2001.

**Ballard, J. G. *Rushing to Paradise.*** "Modern Classic." Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-654814-8, 239pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Mainstream [but near-sf] novel, first published in the UK, 1994; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 90.) Late entry: *Spring* (?) publication, received in June 2001.

**Ballard, J. G. *Super-Cannes.*** "Winner of the *Daily Express* Award for Literature." Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-655160-2, 392pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Mainstream [but near-sf] novel by a leading sf writer, first published in the UK, 2000; this is the first paperback edition of Ballard's most recent book — set in the south of France, in a hi-tech business park in the hills above Cannes, and cast in the form of a psychological thriller; in addition to the *Daily Express* prize alluded on the cover [which was more of an award for Ballard's career as a whole rather than for a particular book], the publishers inform us that this novel was also "the winner of the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Eurasian Region"; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 162; apparently the author's previous novel, *Cocaine Nights* [1996], has sold 150,000 copies in its Flamingo paperback edition, so no doubt there are high hopes for this one too — which so far has sold some 16,000 in its hardcover edition since September 2000 [figures kindly provided by HarperCollins].) July (?) 2001.

**Brown, Molly. *Bad Timing and Other Stories.*** Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-06-X, 267pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £8.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains 21 stories — some humorous, some dark — of which 11 are reprinted from *Interzone* and the majority of the remainder from original anthologies; reviewed by Liz Williams in *IZ* 168, from an advance proof copy; this is the second book from the new "print-on-demand" publishing house established by Ben Jeapes [see the interview with him in *Interzone* 160]; heartily recommended; for ordering information, see website: [www.bigengine.co.uk/](http://www.bigengine.co.uk/)) June 2001.

**Bujold, Lois McMaster. *The Curse of Chalion.*** HarperCollins/Eos, ISBN 0-380-81983-X, 442pp, hardcover, \$25. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; three-time Hugo-winner Bujold takes a break from her usual space-opera sf to produce a fantasy of the Big Commercial sort — "rich in atmosphere, magic, character, and romance.") 9th August 2001.



BOOKS RECEIVED

JUNE 2001

Bull, Emma. **War for the Oaks**. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-765-30034-6, 332pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987; it's described as "one of the novels that has defined modern urban fantasy"; this edition contains a new, two-page introduction by the author, dated November 2000, plus a 12-page appendix containing "three scenes from the never-before-published screenplay.") 18th July 2001.

Bunch, Chris, and Allan Cole. **Sten 5**:

**Revenge of the Damned**. "Over one million Sten books sold worldwide." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-080-6, 388pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; fifth in a paperback-original space-opera series from the decade-before-last, now appearing in the UK for the first time.) 5th July 2001.

Constantine, Storm. **Crown of Silence**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-785-3, 424pp, A-format paperback, cover by Anne Sudworth, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; follow-up to *Sea Dragon Heir* [1999] in the "Chronicles of Magravandias" trilogy.) 14th June 2001.

Constantine, Storm. **The Way of Light**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-60319-4, 408pp, C-format paperback, cover by Anne Sudworth, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £17.99; follow-up to *Sea Dragon Heir* [1999] and *Crown of Silence* [2000] in the "Chronicles of Magravandias" trilogy.) 28th June 2001.

Cornell, Paul. **Something More**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07202-4, 422pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; this is supposedly Cornell's "breakout" book as a serious sf writer; most of his works to date having been "Doctor Who" spinoff novels; certainly, he has built a reputation over the past decade as the most talented of the new writers to emerge from "Who" fandom; he has also written numerous scripts for popular television programmes.) 21st June 2001.

Craig, Brian. **Pawns of Chaos**. "A Warhammer 40,000 Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-85154-141-9, 311pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; "Brian Craig" is a pseudonym of Brian Stableford, who has written several earlier novels for Games Workshop's medieval fantasy series, "Warhammer"; this is, to the best of our knowledge, his first stab at their more science-fictional "Warhammer 40,000" scenario.) Late entry: May publication, received in June 2001.

Dann, Jack. **Jubilee**. Foreword by John Kessel. HarperCollins Voyager (Australia), ISBN 0-7322-6719-6, 441pp, C-format paperback, cover by Nick Stathopoulos, A\$27.50. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition;

Jack Dann, an American author who moved to Australia a few years ago, seems to be enjoying the pleasures of belatedly becoming a big fish in a small pond; this volume, unlikely to have seen the light of day in either the USA or the UK [unless done by a small press], is effectively a celebratory "Best of" collection, containing 17 of Dann's stories from his three decades of writing, several of them of novella length; "the essential Jack Dann," raves the back-cover blurb; it "demonstrates why critics have compared his work to that of Jorge Luis Borges, Roald Dahl, J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick and others"; well, maybe a festschrift is deserved after all these years – good on you, cobber!) Late entry: April publication, received in June 2001.

De Lint, Charles. **Forests of the Heart**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07232-6, 397pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; another tome in Canadian author de Lint's characteristic "urban fantasy" vein, "bringing [according to the blurb] folklore, music and unforgettable characters to life on modern city streets.") 19th July 2001.

Dick, Philip K. **VALIS**. "SF Masterworks, 43." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-339-4, 271pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1981; this was Dick's last-written sf novel, and his strangest – but also one of his most brilliant; the title is an acronym of "Vast Active Living Intelligence System.") 12th July 2001.

Dronfield, Jeremy. **The Alchemist's Apprentice**. "The most famous book you've never read." Headline/Review, ISBN 0-7472-7288-3, 342pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this looks to be a tricksy fantasy about a fantasy – by a British author [born 1955] we haven't heard of before,

although this is his fourth book; reviewers of his earlier, presumably more mainstream, novels have compared him to Iain Banks, William Boyd and Rupert Thompson.) 26th July 2001.

Eddings, David and Leigh. **The Redemption of Althalus**. "The No. 1 Bestseller." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651483-9, 913pp, A-format paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK [?], 2000; one of the biggest of Big Commercial Fantasies, seemingly aimed at a fairly young and simple audience; the final paragraph reads: "He took her in his arms then and held her with tears of joy streaming down his face. 'Oh, I do love you, Em!' was all he could say.") 2nd July 2001.

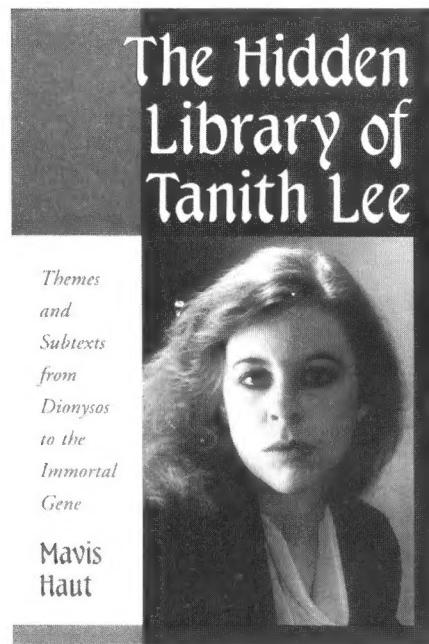
Elliott, Kate. **Child of Flame: Volume Four of Crown of Stars**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-039-3, xvi+1039pp, A-format paperback, cover by Melvyn Grant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; "Kate Elliott" is a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen; the first three volumes of this series were reviewed in *Interzone* by Chris Gilmore, with "cautious praise.") 5th July 2001.

Flewelling, Lynn. **The Bone Doll's Twin: Book One of the Tamir Triad**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711307-2, 438pp, C-format paperback, cover by George Underwood, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; Big Commercial Fantasy by a new [?] American writer, born 1958.) 16th July 2001.

Gaiman, Neil. **American Gods**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7423-1, 504pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; Gaiman's most substantial novel to date, it seems to be cast in picaresque form – "a profoundly strange journey across the heart of the USA.") 26th July 2001.

Glassy, Mark C. **The Biology of Science Fiction Cinema**. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0998-3, viii+296pp, hardcover, \$39.95 [USA], £37.95 [UK]. (Popular science text, using sf movies as its *raison d'être*; first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the author is a cancer researcher at the University of California, San Diego; his chapters cover such subjects as "Cell Biology," "Molecular Biology," "Pharmacology," "Endocrinology," and so on, each drawing on a number of films to illustrate its points – with some jokier chapter titles towards the end: "Shrinkology," "Reanimated Brides," etc.) In the USA, August 2001; in the UK, 23rd August 2001.

Green, Simon R. **Beyond the Blue Moon**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-765-9, 569pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; in which "Captains Hawk and Fisher are the only honest cops in the down and dirty magical city of Haven...") 14th June 2001.





**Hanley, Victoria. *The Seer and the Sword*.** Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-439-99221-4, 367pp, B-format paperback, cover by Ian Miller, £5.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000.) 15th June 2001.

**Haut, Mavis. *The Hidden Library of Tanith Lee: Themes and Subtexts from Dionysos to the Immortal Gene*.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1085-X, viii+216pp, trade paperback, \$32 [USA], £30.40 [UK]. (Critical study of the fiction of a major British fantasy author, first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; Lee's fiction covers a host of themes and settings, "from the prehistoric origins of Christianity to robot-dominated futurescapes," and an appreciative critique such as this is long overdue; the book's retired academic author [born 1936] is a good bit older than her subject – born 1947.) *In the USA, August [?]* 2001; *in the UK, 20th September 2001*.

**Jacoby, Kate. *Black Eagle Rising: Third Book of Elita*.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-750-0, 457pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; "Kate Jacoby" is a pseudonym of Australian author Tracey Oliphant.) 14th June 2001.

**Jones, Diana Wynne. *Year of the Griffin*.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-788-8, 264pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; the blurb describes it as "the hilarious sequel to... *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*" [1998].) 12th July 2001.

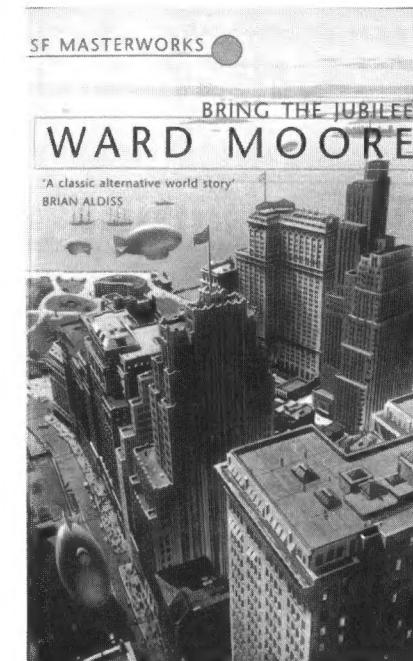
**Jones, Gwyneth. *Bold as Love: A Near Future Fantasy*.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07030-7, 308pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; a pre-publication extract from the opening of this novel appeared as "The Salt Box" in *Interzone* 169; recommended.) 16th August 2001.

**Joshi, S. T. *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H. P. Lovecraft in His Time*.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-946-0, ix+422pp, C-format paperback, cover by Salvator Rosa, £17.95. (Study of the life and thought of the major American horror writer; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £44.95 [not seen]; not to be confused with the prolific Mr Joshi's earlier 700-page book, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* [Necronomicon Press, 1996], or its near-simultaneous 300-page companion, *A Subter Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft* [Borgo Press, 1996], this new work appears to consist of biographical afterthoughts plus an in-depth discussion of Lovecraft's intellectual development – a subject that Joshi seems to find inexhaustible.) Late entry: 30th April publication, received in June 2001.

**Joshi, S. T. *Ramsey Campbell and Modern Horror Fiction*.** Introduction by Ramsey Campbell. "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-775-1, x+180pp, C-format paperback, cover by J. K. Potter, £14.95. (Critical study of the work of a major modern horror writer; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £34.95 [not seen]; this is published almost simultaneously with Joshi's larger book *The Modern Weird Tale* [McFarland, June 2001 – listed here two issues ago], which also deals in part with Ramsey Campbell; although there may be some overlap with Joshi's other work, it looks to be a very thorough single-author study; recommended.) 5th June 2001.

**Kilworth, Garry. *Gaslight Geezers: A Welkin Weasels Adventure*.** Illustrated by Dave Hopkins. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54704-2, 382pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £4.99. (Humorous juvenile animal fantasy novel, first edition; the first in a new trilogy "featuring the descendants of the adventurous weasels whose story is told in the first three books, *Thunder Oak*, *Castle Storm* and *Windjammer Run*"; set in a cod-Victorian world, this one looks like fun – its title no doubt a joking reference to the entry on "Gaslight Romance" in Clute & Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* [1997]; it comes complete with a cover sticker which says: "As good as Brian Jacques or YOUR MONEY BACK!") 5th July 2001.

**Lackey, Mercedes. *Brightly Burning*.** "The Legendary Story of Herald Lavan Firestorm." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07200-8, 406pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; latest in the "Heralds of Valdemar" series.) 21st June 2001.



**Leiber, Fritz. *The First Book of Lankhmar*.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 18." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-327-0, 762pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £8.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; it contains the collections *Swords and Deviltry* [1970], *Swords Against Death* [1970], *Swords in the Mist* [1968] and *Swords Against Wizardry* [1968], all first published in the USA; with this fine fat volume, containing approximately half the adventures of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, the "Fantasy Masterworks" series now has all the best sword-and-sorcery fiction in the bag – following, as it does, the two "definitive" collections of Robert E. Howard's "Conan" stories and the recent opening volume of Michael Moorcock's "Elric" saga [see the review of those books by Matt Colborn in this issue of *Interzone*.] 14th June 2001.

**Levy, Roger. *Reckless Sleep*.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-890-6, 426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; a debut novel by a new British writer; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 156.) 14th June 2001.

**Lindholm, Megan. *Wolf's Brother*.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711434-6, 236pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £5.99. (Prehistoric fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; sequel to *The Reindeer People*.) 16th July 2001.

**McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. *Acorna's World*.** "Continuing the enthralling adventures of the Unicorn Girl." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14749-4, 382pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this is probably a sharecrop – i.e. written by Scarborough with McCaffrey's indulgence.) 5th July 2001.

**McKillip, Patricia A. *The Riddle-Master's Game*.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 19." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-796-9, 622pp, B-format paperback, cover by Michael Mariano, £8.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; it contains the novels *The Riddle-Master of Hed* [1976], *Heir of Sea and Fire* [1977] and *Harpist in the Wind* [1979], all first published in the USA – and previously collected in the UK as *The Chronicles of Morgan, Prince of Hed* [1981].) 12th July 2001.

**McKinley, Robin. *Spindle's End*.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00865-8, 354pp, A-format paperback, cover by Daniel Craig, \$6.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; based on "Sleeping Beauty," this recent book by a Newbery Award-winning author may be of passing interest to us Brits because of its dedication: "To the Lodge, my Woodwold, and to the other Dickinsons who love it too" [American writer McKinley married British author Peter Dickinson some years ago, and they live in a big house called \*ok Lodge, Hampshire, England].) June 2001.

**Moore, Ward. *Bring the Jubilee*.** "SF Masterworks, 42." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-764-0,

194pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1953; originally published in a shorter version in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1952, this well-written tale of a world in which the South won the American Civil War still seems like a classic of its sort.) 14th June 2001.

Odom, Mel. **The Rover**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87882-6, 400pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this appears to be a debut hardcover Big Commercial Fantasy by an author who has previously written a great deal of paperback-original fiction; as the blurb on the proof helpfully expresses it, Odom is "a bestselling writer for hire for Wizards of the Coast's *Forgotten Realms*, Gold Eagle's Mack Bolan, and Pocket's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* book lines.") July 2001.

Reed, Robert. **Marrow**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-078-4, 502pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 160 – which review is quoted on the cover of this paperback: "Marrow is an extraordinary and extraordinarily intelligent novel stuffed with wonder and wit... it should elevate him to the ranks of the very best writers in the genre"; gosh, did Paul really say that?; let's see... yes, he did.) 5th July 2001.

Roberts, Adam. **On**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07176-1, 388pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; this is the second novel by Adam Roberts [born 1965], following his highly-praised *Salt* [2000], which was nominated for the most recent Arthur C. Clarke Award; the publishers rate it as "a superbly confident novel of a radically different world" with "echoes of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *The Book of the New Sun*.") 21st June 2001.

Russell, Eric Frank. **Next of Kin**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07240-7, 181pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA as *The Space Willies*, 1958, and in the UK, expanded under the present title, 1959; one of Russell's best-remembered bolshy sf comedies.) 12th June 2001.

Scott, Melissa. **The Jazz**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87542-8, 316pp, trade paperback, cover by Nicholas Jainschigg, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; it's described as "a hip novel of the media-dominated future.") 18th July 2001.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Stochastic Man**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05123-X, 229pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1975; J. G. Ballard, reviewing it in the *New Statesman*, praised it as "an engaging tale... fast and literate.") 19th July 2001.

Stirling, S. M. **T2: Infiltrator**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07155-9, 389pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf-movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2001; according to the title page, it's "based on the world created in the motion picture written by James Cameron and William Wisher"; they don't bother to actually name the film on the title page, but evidently it's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [directed by James Cameron, 1991]; the author, Stephen Michael Stirling – not published in Britain before, to the best of our knowledge – is a Canadian, born 1953, who achieved some transatlantic notoriety a decade or so back with his "Draka" series of militaristic sf novels.) 19th July 2001.

Stone, Dave. **The Slow Empire**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53835-X, 251pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; Dave Stone seems to be the joker in the pack of "Who" authors.) 2nd July 2001.

Topping, Keith. **Byzantium!** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53836-8, 284pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the First Doctor, Ian, Barbara and Vicki, this one is set in the Byzantine Empire, and resembles something the following author, one-time Byzantine scholar H. Turtledove, might have produced in his earlier years [well, if he had been British, and a "Who" fan].) 2nd July 2001.

Turtledove, Harry. **Colonisation: Aftershocks**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-76909-2, 488pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £17.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; third part of a follow-up series to the author's four-volume "Worldwar" series.) 19th July 2001.

Turtledove, Harry. **The Great War: Breakthroughs**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-71550-2, 657pp, A-format

paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; sequel to *The Great War: American Front* [1998] and *The Great War: Walk in Hell* [1999] in an ongoing tetralogy about a First World War which went differently from the one familiar in our timeline.) 19th July 2001.

Welch, Jane. **Dawn of a Dark Age: Volume One of The Book of Man**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711249-1, 548pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; first in a new trilogy which sees the author return to her original publishers, HarperCollins/Voyager – after an outing with Simon & Schuster/Earthlight.) 2nd July 2001.

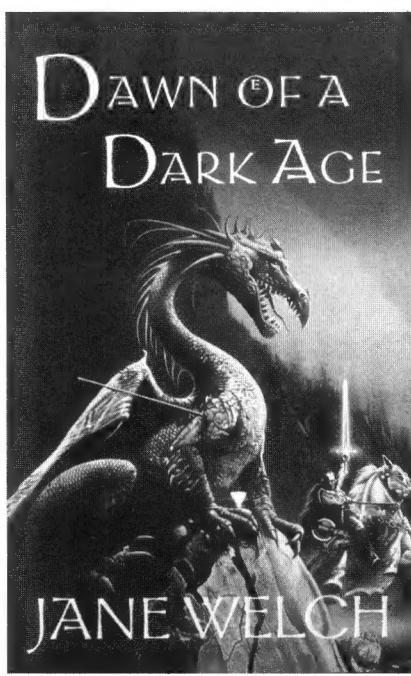
Wilson, Robert Charles. **The Chronoliths**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87384-0, 301pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it opens in Thailand, and involves time-slippage.) August 2001.

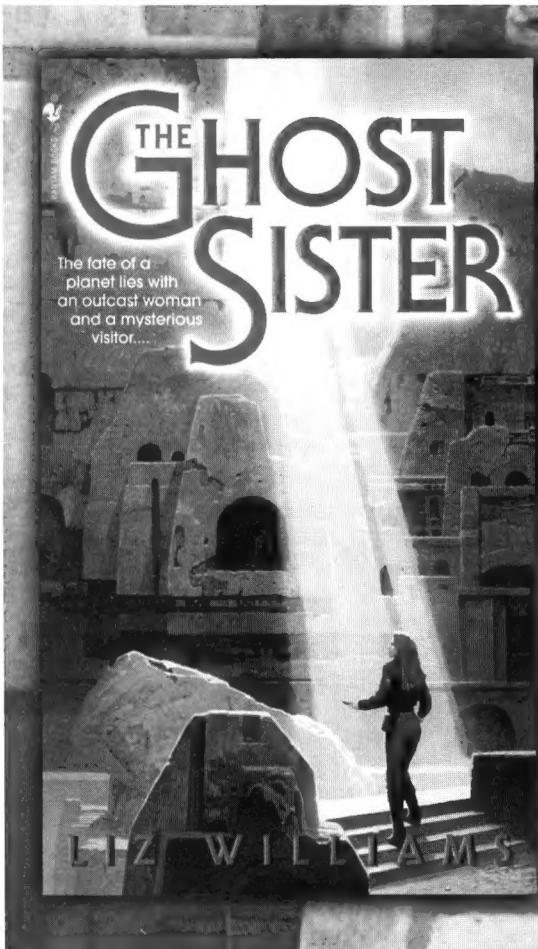
Wilson, Robert Charles. **The Perseids and Other Stories**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87524-X, 224pp, trade paperback, cover by Stephan Martiniere, \$12.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 2000; the American-born, Canadian-resident author's first published gathering of shorter work, it contains nine stories and an afterword.) 16th July 2001.

Wurts, Janny. **Peril's Gate: The Wars of Light and Shadow, Volume 6: Third Book of The Alliance of Light**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710106-6, 675pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; typical Big Commercial Fantasy, perhaps distinguished from the run-of-the-mill by the fact that the author is her own, quite competent, cover artist.) 16th July 2001.

Zindell, David. **The Lightstone: Book One of the Ea Cycle**. "The Lord of the Rings meets *Le Morte d'Arthur*." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224755-0, 942pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 2001; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; this sf author's first foray into Big Commercial Fantasy – and very big it is too; see the forthcoming Zindell interview in *Interzone*.) 6th August 2001.

Zubrin, Robert. **First Landing**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00859-3, 262pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Warner, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; this is a debut novel by an American space engineer who has previously written non-fiction about Mars [the publishers call him a "renowned Mars visionary"]; as its title indicates, it's yet another take on the first manned Mars mission; Kevin J. Anderson, Gregory Benford and Kim Stanley Robinson all commend it on the cover – although there's a whiff of faint praise about some of their remarks: "a Ken Follett-like Mars novel," says Benford; "a real page-turner," says Robinson.) July 2001.





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